

## **“It’s not easy, but worth doing”**

**Timea Balajcza comes from Hungary, grew up in France and has been living in Poland for the last 19 years. In the finance sector, until a few years ago responsible for 12 European markets, she now manages 800 translators and interpreters across the world. Today, BALAJCZA Specialized Translations Agency, which she set up in 2010, provides translation services in all language combinations.**



**The next in a series of interviews deals with her experiences associated with quitting full time work and establishing and running her own business.**

## **Mentoring and handing in my notice**

*IW: In the last interview you spoke about what motivated you to start your own business. Could you take us, step by step, through how BALAJCZA Specialized Translations Agency came to be?*

TB: When I made the decision go ahead with my business I employed my first member of staff. This was on 15 March 2010. At that time I still held onto my corporate job. I was aware that for the first three or even four months my presence at the agency was not essential as it was being set up. I effectively had two jobs: still at the corporation whilst at the same time in touch with my employee. I worked in the evenings, mornings and at the weekends - until November. As I worked in finance, I started feeling the pressure in September: this was a period for budgeting, I had a lot of work. On top of that the agency was making its first steps: the website was up and running by June, July saw the first customers with more coming in September. I decided that two jobs were too much for me. Then, in November I took part in *Vital Voices*, a mentoring programme for women. I mention this as it did help me a great deal to make my decision. During the programme I worked with a mentor, but also spent two weeks with other participants, or a mentee. Apart from a few girls who worked at corporations and did not want to change anything, most participants were girls who had worked for corporations in the past, but have already made the transition to running their own businesses and were their own bosses. It was them that motivated me by saying: “You have to take the plunge. It is not easy, there is no financial stability, but it is worth doing”. Still in November, once the programme was over, I handed in my notice.

*IW: What made you decide to take part in the programme?*

TB: I was persuaded. I am a member of PWNnet and the then boss started organising *Vital Voices*. The programme was just being introduced to Poland. Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright started it in the States. I was told that I should take part especially that I already have my own business and sooner or later I will put all my eggs in one basket anyway. That’s why I made the decision.

## **Foreign customers**

*IW: Today you manage 800 translators and interpreters all round the world. Where there any ground breaking events during the recent years of expansion?*

TB: Our growth was rather gradual, month on month and year on year we managed to increase turnover. Hiring another employee seemed to be a milestone: there were only the two of us in the first year. The fact that foreign customers started contacting us directly was also significant. At first, we only dealt with Polish branches of foreign companies, but suddenly there was a breakthrough: customers from the USA, France, Spain, Luxembourg and Hungary knocking on our doors.

### **Family board meetings**

*IW: How can I picture the structure of your company? There are the translators, there is an office... Can you describe it?*

TB: It is a family business, so the management board comprises me and my husband. But it is me who looks after the agency on a day to day basis, my husband supports me with ideas and also when it comes to finance and strategy. We often discuss the direction in which the business is heading.

*IW: Do you have board meetings?*

TB: Yes. Together with Iwona, who has been with us since the start and looks after customers, we discuss monthly results. We also take these opportunities to sum up where we are, where we stand with customers and what steps to take next. Going back to the structure: today we employ one person who looks after customers, one responsible for admin, settlements and invoicing and one more who takes care of the needs of the office: procurement, post, etc. Furthermore, at the start of this year, we hired another employee who helps Iwona in looking after customers. Apart from this office structure there are external translators and interpreters whom we work with. To be entered onto our database they go through a rigorous selection process - completing the form on our website is only the first step. They are then required to provide us with their CV, references, complete a questionnaire and finally a sample translation. We do not simply start working with willy-nilly anyone who applies. We do our checks. But sometimes even that is not enough: there was an instance where a translator handed in a good sample translation but when we verified their first actual job the quality turned out to be very poor. Perhaps someone else did the sample for them, just to help them get their foot in the door. We have to have our finger on the pulse all the time.

### **Unusual jobs**

*IW: What is the daily grind at BALAJCZA like? A customer calls, orders a translation - what happens then?*

TB: Calls or writes, today the latter is more common. When we receive an enquiry the first step is to allocate a translator who will guarantee the required quality. We do not send orders to just any translator. We usually have particular translators who fit the profile, language combination and specialise in the given subject, but we first have to make sure they are available to get on with this job. Once the translator confirms availability, we put together a quote. All this happens relatively quickly, it takes 10, 15 or maybe 20 minutes. Once the quote is sent to the customer we await their decision as to whether the pricing and completion date are acceptable.

*IW: Do you remember the most unusual job: a strange combination of languages or something that had to be translated in half an hour?*

TB: Oh, we sometimes get real gems. We recently had a customer who ordered an express translation of 12 pages for the same day. We contacted our tried and tested translators and our best turnaround time was for the following morning. The customer agreed, mentioning that the document is still being worked on. It was already after 6:00 pm, when my colleague had already left work, that I received two documents containing 50 pages rather than 12. Of course in the end we managed to do the job. We also did an unusual translation of the terms and conditions for a shop, into 28 languages. On a few occasions we were asked to do a certified translation from Arabic and Hindi into Polish. We had an interesting consecutive interpreting job for a group of women from Ukraine and Russia who had very strict requirements when it came to the interpreter: it had to be a man, 35 at most and handsome (we were asked to provide photographs). We had a laugh in the office that this was more like casting than an interpreting job. Going back to languages, I think the most unusual was Urdu. A bailiff company, supporting Polish businesses who invest abroad in the more exotic countries is a customer of ours. When its clients are having problems in terms of recovering receivables, it steps in and needs an individual who speaks the language of the given country. The job was somewhat of a challenge as the customer did not require a translation but a person who comes to their site and makes telephone calls and writes e-mails there and then. *IW: And did you manage to find such a person?*

TB: We did. There is a gentleman who works at a university, that's where we get our Urdu translator from.

**I am not a translator, I am an economist.**

*IW: In the last interview you mentioned that as a student you dabbled in translations. Do you still do it, say, in emergency situations?*

TB: To be honest, no. I did translate in the past, but truth be told, it was only so that I gain experience and as a summer job. So, it cannot be said that I once was a translator and then changed my profession. I am an economist with a background in finance and I would even say that translating was never a passion of mine. I love languages, they are my passion, but translating is a hard job. Sometimes friends send me a text for me to translate, say in Hungarian. But firstly, I usually do not feel like doing it, as sometimes it feels that my Polish is not good enough and that I may be a little out of touch with Hungarian. Secondly: if I give the job to my translator, they will do it in half the time whereas I might need to think about how to translate it. People often think that to translate one just has to know a language, and that is not true: practice and experience are essential. If someone does it all the time they simply get better at it, like in any other profession.

*IW: Your translations agency is a member of industry and trade chambers and chambers of commerce, it assumes patronage over various events, is active in the field of charities. How much of your time is spent representing the company?*

TB: I very often attend all sorts of meetings. We are members of three chambers: French, Scandinavian and Swiss. These are very dynamic organisations, where meetings are held frequently. It does seem that some people think that when a business signs up with a given chamber, contacts and customers are handed over on a silver platter - that is not the case. It simply presents opportunities to meet and network. I see the growth of my company in such representation, talking about my company rather than paid advertising. I would say that I have a meeting almost every day,

sometimes two a day: a business breakfast in the morning and a reception or networking meeting in the evening. I would say that meetings outside of the office take up 3-4 hours every day. Apart of that I spend a lot of time on social networking websites, I put together a fanletter which is sent out to individuals interested in foreign languages.

### **Most interesting events**

*IW: You certainly keep us up to date with the goings on at BALAJCZA. In summing up the operations of your business to date do you remember a particularly significant or extraordinarily interesting event?*

TB: We often service conferences in terms of interpreting and also provide the necessary equipment. I think that the most prestigious event was the Warsaw Economic Hub at the Warsaw Stock Exchange where we were the interpretation supplier for the second time in a row. It takes place in November and December, people from political and economic circles take part. We interpret in three rooms, where three sets of equipment and three pairs of interpreters are required. This is a very prestigious conference, with 400 if not 500 participants. And in terms of other events, I would like to mention the Zoo Fan Club meetings which are particularly dear to me. From time to time meetings are held to which I can invite my customers. That's where I organised the last company birthday, a tour of the zoo was part of the programme. The customers who were able to make it did like it a lot.

### **What does networking entail?**

*IW: Over four years you've created a network of contacts in your business surroundings, including a team of several hundred translators all over the globe, whom you work with. It seems that you have a talent for networking. Are there any tips you can share with those just starting to grow their own businesses?*

TB: I do not consider myself to be a networking ace. However, there are places and individuals who practice professional networking. I do not like it, as it entails collecting as many business card as possible in, say, an hour. For me, it's about something else. I think networking is not about collecting business cards just to boast the largest Excel sheet of contacts without being able to put faces to names and events. My advice would be to talk to one or two people, but make it count: so that we remember that person and vice versa. And there is one more thing often forgotten by many people: "do not talk about yourselves but listen to the other person and ask questions, talk about yourself and your business only once asked. This may sound trivial, but people often just talk about themselves. We all like to do that, however in order to establish new contacts and get to know people who appreciate talking to us and will remember us, asking questions and listening are paramount.

### **Your business environment**

*IW: Well, this is a subject for the next interview, but briefly, after a few years of running your own business what is your opinion of the business environment, I mean the business partners and customers in Poland?*

TB: I have my own opinion here, which may not reflect the overall market situation. Each and every translation agency offers a different quality of service, approaches customers and jobs in a different manner. Based on my experience I can say that things are improving when it comes to customers and

their loyalty. It wasn't so difficult to make contact, win a first job, but there was constant pressure from companies to reduce prices. We are not the cheapest on the market, we value quality which has to be ensured. In the beginning, companies were looking for the cheapest service possible. Talking to people, I was told that in looking to save money that are translating in-house. I tried to explain that this also costs money, as when an assistant is engaged with translations they are not doing their job. For a year now, perhaps a year and a half I've noticed that companies we work with are starting to value quality and know that a translation which may be a couple of zloty cheaper will not necessarily be better. For example they appreciate the fact that we put together glossaries for our returning customers who use our services regularly - this is client specific terminology. Such glossaries are then provided to each translator who deals with this customer to ensure consistency and improve service quality. As such I am pleased with our current direction.

### **The future**

*IW: Talking about the direction, can you give us a glimpse of your plans for the future? Will it entail further growth, or more specialisations? Where will BALAJCZA Translations Agency be in the future?*

TB: My goals for the forthcoming year certainly include employing additional members of staff to verify translations, someone to do the admin work and a sales rep. The sales rep's task would be to help me during networking meetings or even attend them without me. I certainly want to expand on the Polish market and need someone to help me in this. Another direction is branching out abroad. As I said we have a number of foreign clients who order translations with us directly. Here the French and English markets are the most prominent, the most promising. I plan to open an office, a kind of a help desk in order to service the customers we have thus far and acquire new ones.