

# Languages add value

DON'T DISREGARD YOUR FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS, THEY COULD BE YOUR GREATEST ASSET.

## **“It’s only Serbian, it doesn’t really count.”**

This was my reaction whenever someone mentioned how lucky I was to speak a second language. To me, Serbian was nothing more than a means of communicating with family. It served no greater purpose and therefore held no greater value (a simplistic conclusion). My former colleagues in The Hague would twitch if they could read this. And with good reason too, for it was this language that opened doors for me last year. After working at an international tribunal and translating for researchers from the Geneva Academy, I finally returned to Australia and buried that sentence for good.

You see, I had struggled to mould the opening chapter of my career. The only legal experience I ever managed to get was volunteering for a Russian lawyer in Melbourne who shared my appreciation for ice hockey. Last year, however, I peered outside the box and with a bit of luck I was offered a legal internship at the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia at The Hague. Although based on recommendation and academic merit, I soon realised how much it had to do with my language skills.

Going into the experience, I dodged plenty of “You’ll be making coffee” comments. However, by the end of the first week, I was helping draft the final brief in our client’s case. By the end of the month, I was accompanying a defence lawyer to Estonia as his translator.

I had never translated in my life, but that didn’t seem to matter. As long as I spoke the language, I could break the communication barrier – and believe me, that counts for more than you think. So I found myself in a window-less cell at an Estonian maximum-security prison, where the chairs were screwed into the floor and the outdoor speakers were pumping Michael Jackson’s “Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough”. Communication with the prison staff became a friendly game of charades, bringing amusement to even the simplest things, such as asking for a glass of water. I spent four days in that curious place, translating for the lawyer and his client, a convicted war criminal, serving a 29-year sentence.

Word got around that I spoke Serbian, and apparently that was like finding a needle in a haystack. I was suddenly talking to people from the Geneva Academy and on top of my work at the tribunal, I began translating at various prisons around Europe for PhD research on the sentencing of war criminals.

With every interview, the value of my language skills became more apparent. I basked in the satisfaction of seeing the parties content because the client finally understood the difference between a review and an appeal. I realised that I had more to offer the industry than just my legal experience.

If you have ever underestimated your foreign language skills like I did, suffered from some self-induced cultural complex, consider just how much you can gain by selling your language. Any language. Consider becoming an intern at an international legal institution, law firm or NGO. Don’t be pessimistic about what you’ll end up doing (remember, people thought I’d be making coffee). If you’re concerned that you’ll stray into a translation career, don’t be. It was that very translation that enriched my entire legal experience. It gave me a more critical understanding of the international justice system and helped me acquire a knowledge that is difficult to convey, but that I strongly encourage everyone to pursue.

So if you do speak something rarer than English, remember that the law (and the world) would love to hear from you. ■

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