Taking care of business

Anna Lewis trained as a translator – and now works as a business manager for a translation agency. She explains her role

I joined Bla Translation in 2018 fresh out of the School of Welsh at Bangor University in North Wales. I had always been a language geek, but it wasn't until I followed a translation studies module as part of my course at university that I decided I wanted to become a Welsh translator. The set logical rules, consistent structures and lack of ambiguity in Welsh grammar appealed to me, and so I was naturally drawn to translation as a career possibility. Then, after working as a Welsh translator for five years, a new opportunity arose within Bla for a business development officer.

A change of direction, for Bla and for me

The director was keen on establishing a business unit at Bla to take care of the tasks required within a private company, with the main aim of driving new business by seeking fresh opportunities. Along with this, the business development officer's remit would involve expanding the services offered at Bla beyond our traditional English into and out of Welsh translation service; diving into the international translation industry; and establishing what has become Bla_2 – our international languages unit.

It was not a translation role, and did not necessarily require a linguistic background. It called for a different skill set and a more commercially minded individual – attributes which aren't typically the primary expertise of a linguist. So why did I apply for it?

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One of the things I enjoy most about working in a translation agency is the pace and the variety – and I've always known that I am not someone who would want to stick to one job role forever. I remember sitting at my desk one day reading the job advert a few days after it had been posted online. I saw this new role as a golden opportunity for me to stir things up in my day-to-day life and tackle a new challenge head-on within the company where I'd trained. Despite the fact I had no formal qualifications in business, nor any practical business experience under my belt, I took a deep breath and dived in…

Somehow, I swam rather than sank. My day-to-day life at work became a little more intense as I was dealing with the unknown, not only for me personally but to some extent for the company too. The director and I worked on a plan to achieve our goals. In essence, our plan was split into two parts: one component focusing on our Welsh language offer and the other on developing our new international languages offer.

The former had an immediate impact as I started to establish Bla's online presence on social media platforms (LinkedIn especially – follow us @BlaTranslation if you don't already!), and we had a website refresh, strengthening our brand even further. A mixture of cold marketing and social media work has helped us to reach new people and increase awareness of us as a company. We have participated, and succeeded, in more tender opportunities, which has led to an increase in our contracted clients, providing even greater security for our future.

In order to build up Bla_2 (our international languages unit), we developed a strong database of qualified freelance linguists in multiple languages, strengthening our network in the international languages industry. As a result, we have now managed and completed a number of translation projects for a growing portfolio of clients.

The benefits of a separate unit

Perhaps it is unusual for a Welsh translation company to have its own business unit – but we have seen many benefits in doing so. The investment we've made in this unit means that we are now better resourced to provide a tailored service to our clients or prospective clients. As a company, we certainly have more breathing space and increased availability to discuss requirements with clients in further detail, which ultimately boosts client retention.

To support our expansion, in October 2024 we welcomed a business officer, and last year I was appointed business manager at Bla. Our role in the business unit is dynamic – no two days are ever the same. We could be meeting potential new clients, checking in with current clients and/or managing translation projects into international languages...all while keeping an eagle eye on how the broader translation industry is developing. Generally, our week can be broken down into a lot of outreach work to further strengthen our profile; a large amount of research

Welsh translation skills and a new marketing focus

One of the key insights I have gained since focusing on our commercial operations at Bla is the lack of appreciation towards Welsh translators within our own nation. If I were paid £1 for every time I read the words 'we have a Welsh speaker within our organisation who is responsible for completing our Welsh translations', I would have long retired by now! There seems to be a limited understanding of the qualifications and training required to become a qualified, successful Welsh translator, and this is paired with the presumption that any Welsh speaker can translate into or from Welsh. This may be because Wales is such a naturally bilingual nation, where the Welsh and English languages inherently coexist. There's a tendency not to recognise translators' specific skills, profession and expertise.

In light of this, the focus of our marketing activities at Bla has altered slightly in recent months to take more of an educational tone. It goes without saying that our primary aim of advertising our company remains – we want those who are searching for translation specialists to turn to us as their first choice. However, in recent times there has been a broader goal in mind too – to gain respect for the Welsh translation industry as our profession. Our social media content now includes posts that are intended to prompt consideration, real thought and reflection on the significance of Welsh translation in Wales. Our hope is that our online marketing activity will guide people to make the correct choice when searching for a Welsh translator and encourage them to invest in their translation provider in the same way that they invest in their physical assets.

As passionate Welsh speakers and professional translators, we do not wish to deter people from having a go at translation, and we would always help if anyone wanted to improve their Welsh writing skills. However, it is important to uphold linguistic standards, and we must recognise that there are some circumstances where only a qualified translator can do the job. In future, I hope to see more recognition in Wales of translation as a professional career opportunity. I would like to see those seeking a translation service provider turning to qualified linguists rather than to a colleague who 'speaks Welsh'.

Bla Translation highlights the value of professional Welsh translation

work to identify possible work opportunities; following up business leads to maximise conversion rates; carrying out marketing activities; as well as managing general enquiries, translation requests and providing client care.

In some ways what we do in the business unit resembles the traditional project manager role – but there are some crucial differences. There is a stronger emphasis on commercial operations such as marketing, acquiring clients and preparing bids for procurement activities. We are not only dealing with immediate needs such as managing current translation projects, but also looking to the future of the business and planning for it.

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Learning curve and linguistics

There's no doubt that this has all been a steep learning curve. To help support me on my journey, I have attended training webinars on subjects such as social media for business, optimising SEO, online adverts etc, of which I had absolutely no prior knowledge. A lot of my learning has happened naturally as I undertake the everyday tasks required within a business, tackling the various challenges that present themselves, with support from other members of our team. My entrepreneurial skills have improved dramatically since taking on this role, especially so in terms of creating pricing strategies, negotiating deals, and developing bids for procurement processes. In all honesty, I am still learning – which is my favourite part of the job.

Finally, it has also been interesting that although the original job specification did not include translation or interpreting skills, in practice we have all found that having a former translator leading the business unit is also a strategic advantage. My knowledge of how translators and translation companies operate helps us to manage client expectations within the parameters we've provided. I work with clients or prospective clients with a unique hybrid of a linguist-informed mind and a business-informed mind, which helps to bridge the gap between our translators and our clients.

Perhaps my journey has been slightly different from traditional translator progression within translation agencies, but it is a pathway I would urge those who are already in translation roles to consider, especially if they are naturally business-minded and want to further boost their proficiency and capabilities. It definitely opens doors you might not ever have imagined would be available to you.

Anna Lewis MITI is a Welsh translator and business manager at Bla Translation, a translation agency based in Wales. She has over seven years' experience in the Welsh translation industry and has recently joined the international translation industry. Anna is passionate about seeing Welsh businesses expanding and flourishing bilingually.