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"The Good, Bad, and Frustrating of Recruiting Transcribing Students"

TypeWell Conference, Spring 2013: Learn, Listen, and Lead

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Jean: It's 9:30 so we'd better start. We're competing with Judy so we knew we'd be a small group. When Kate asked us to do this session, we were nervous because we don't have the answers. We're hoping you do. We can tell you what we've experienced. I'm Jean and I've been working with Shirley, who's currently away in Southeast Asia.

I'm Allison, and I work with Jean. My role is screening candidates and providing mentoring to help transcribers maintain their skills.

We thought we'd start with learning who's here with Barbara, our transcriber in the back.

Jo: Jo Alexander from OSU.

Becky: Becky Davidson from the University of Kentucky. We've had TypeWell for 5 years.

Tshombe: Tshombe Brown with Strada Communications, director of community outreach.

Chanel: Chanel Carlascio with Strada Communications. I've been with TypeWell since 2005 and started providing services in January 2006.

I'm Lizzy, also with Strada as a recent employee. In the future I might be evaluating new transcribers and I also am interested in alternative media.

Jean: I thought we'd go through what we want to talk about this session: strategies to improve recruitment, and how to assess transcribers re: level of commitment, etc., so we don't lose so many people.

The PCAS website is at the top of this handout and our email addresses on the bottom. In British Columbia, starting in 2004, we've done various kinds of research and projects related to speech to text services. As of 2009, we've had provincial funding to recruit students and funding to sponsor them. Our original thought was to provide support and resources for coordinators to use in their institutions and that's been frustrating for us because it doesn't happen.

Tshombe: The resources you've developed?

Jean: Yes. We have job postings, standard questions, documents that summarize key attributes for transcribers, etc. In the early days Judy provided a lot of advice. We've revised our documents and they're available on the website for institutions to use.

Early on, we realized we needed a way to keep track of the students and where they were in the application process. Now we have an admin person to track all the data, who's applied, who has passed, who's been interviewed, CVs, screening, reminders, etc. We learned we couldn't document all of that information without administrative assistance.

Allison: The people we were able to score were a great, enthusiastic pool of competent transcribers. That's worked well for us. We have a good relationship with ATBC, a technology center that provides resources for TypeWell and other speech-to-text services. They've been invaluable with our remote services. We're lucky to have them.

Jean: Candidates who come in for training are provided with loaned equipment. They can keep it beyond a certain period of time. We hope they'll become employees of the institution, moving from student to transcriber. The amount of time they keep equipment beyond their completion, if they need it for mentoring, we arrange for that.

Tshombe: You mentioned the students becoming employed. Does that happen often instead of becoming independent contractors?

Allison: Most are independent contractors. Several colleges have "employees" but it's on a semester-by-semester basis, whereas others have independent contractors who submit invoices. We had two transcribers with one year contracts, then the year was over and that contract ended.

Jean: We have had interest from potential candidates. We use Craigslist, and resources similar to that, and we've used career sites at college websites, or the institutional websites for people who want to get a foot in the door. We've had a lot of interest there.

The career websites, we've just started doing that in the last few months, where employers can post, along with training opportunity notices. We're looking for trainees, not offering work, although we offer sponsorship. It's been fuzzy and it's been difficult for institutions to get their head around that.

Channel: Do they get paid during training?

Jean: No. The demand for services is increasing and we've done a lot more linking with school systems, teachers of the deaf, program outreach for D/HH students, and the ministry; both in our system and K-12 systems [correction of contacts] When we started in 2005 TypeWell wasn't that well known and that is still an issue.

Tshombe: What is the targeted demographic that you use or is it on general sites?

Allison: More general than targeted. Sometimes they're posted through disability resource centers. We've had four-year students who transcribed until they graduated. If you've found a demographic where you've experienced success, please share that with us.

Jean: We tried ads with parents' resources hoping to target moms who wanted part-time work or wanted to go back to work. Mostly it's been institution-specific instead of posting on parent magazines.

Tshombe: I'm thinking about parents at a PTA or other events a parent would attend where they'd see these things.

Becky: Or at the YMCA.

Tshombe: The age of the kid would be toddler, so I don't know if that would be effective. I never thought of that demographic, so looking at where they'd actually be gathered, or playground community centers.

Jean: That's where we're hoping to get local on the ground coordinators more involved because we don't know where those places might be. In the beginning we wanted to build a long term pool so we didn't want to target students.

Allison: You put all the resources into training so --

Chanel: They're unreliable. School comes first, not their job. They'll drop it for something else. They don't have the professionalism and commitment. The job isn't a

priority. It's a conflict, so you get dropped. I have heard of schools, a couple of years ago where someone said she had good experience using students as transcribers.

A grad student might be more reliable. But a freshman, sophomore is still young, so it's more like a student worker type of job. It doesn't provide the reliability for the student population.

Jean: We have a university of art and design. They've done their own recruiting for their needs and recruited students. So because there aren't many jobs for graduates with that degree, they've kept those students on as transcribers.

Liz: I'm a musician, so it works well with my schedule. It's a pro and con when talking about hiring students. They like the flexibility but may not take it as seriously as a full-time job.

Jo: My experience is different with the students I've hired; they were terrific. The majority of jobs for students are \$8-9/hour, whereas we start them out at \$22/hour. What makes me feel good is that I get to see these students progress, graduate, go to grad school, and they have jobs already as transcribers.

Some of our transcribers have been at OSU for 10-11 years. I know I'm hiring them part-time and realize they'll need other ways to support themselves and if a full time job comes along I understand. While I do love keeping people over the years, I understand if they can't stay.

Chanel: If you use new students, do you have any concerns?

Jo: I don't hire freshmen. The first year is difficult, so let them settle in, and then it's a careful selection process.

Jean: We are selective as well.

Do you pay for the training, knowing they'll be there for a couple of years?

Jo: The way I look at it is, give me another option. [Participants laughing.] The only way I can see where I can count on keeping a study pool of transcribers is giving them a real job. The only way I can do that is with a stable work base. That's why I've been increasing the student population to be serviced to include international students, and I'll be presenting on that at this conference.

I've heard of people setting up contracts and our legal departments steered us away from

that. In interviews, we tell you that we're paying for this course, and that your skills are transferrable, and to please give us two years. But we understand that life happens. It hasn't happened yet, where someone leaves during the two years, so I just roll with the punches.

Allison: Student satisfaction is most important. We're happy with the level of service our transcribers are providing. PCAS is starting to do more remote projects to make remote transcribing more of an option. We've done pilot projects with remote transcribing at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, University of Victoria, University of British Columbia and a project coming up this fall. With the help from ATBC, we've had a smooth time of it.

Tshombe: Where is the focus for the projects?

Allison: Northern BC, Victoria ...

Jean: We've been at this for a while and we know what the government wants our outcomes to be.

Allison: As a result of our recruitment challenges, transcriber requests go unfilled. We have requests and advertisements that go unfilled so there is a lack of transcribers.

Jean: We know that students aren't getting the services they need. So they're relying on student notetakers. We've seen a real funnel effect, with over 70 applications expressing interest over the last year. There have been 35 people who applied to TypeWell, we've interviewed ten and it funnels down until we get down to 2-3 people. It takes a ton to get a small number in training.

Allison: We'll get strong candidates, and before they get into training, they change their mind, or quit midway through, or get a full-time job. It's frustrating. We do a screening, interview, and express clearly that work is sporadic, semester-to-semester, yet one of the reasons for attrition is that the work wasn't steady. We have them sign an "Intent to Commit" paper, which legally doesn't hold much worth.

Jean: In the self screening, it asks about the nature of the work, how it fits into their lives, etc.

Allison: Another reason for attrition is because it's independent contracting. I don't think they understand what that means. They get notifications with work offers coming through, but they don't know how to approach a coordinator. We want to build that information into their mentoring because it's daunting, not knowing how to do that. What

we feel we're explaining clearly ends up being why people leave.

Liz: That's why it's good to target audiences.

Jean: We've had people come through the auxiliary pool, and they work part time until they get full time. Not 100% but that's part of it. Allison has been doing follow up interviews and it confirms what we've said. We thought we were clear, but apparently not.

Allison: And people don't answer my follow up questions either so it's frustrating.

Tshombe: I'm assuming the message isn't getting across, so it's the nature of the business, along with - in life, most people are workers, not independent contractors, so maybe that's the missing link, teaching someone how to be an independent contractor.

We think mentoring is about how to be better at your job, not how to be a freelancer, manage off-cycles, how to run a business, be an independent contractor. I wanted to throw that out. You might be blaming yourself for not being clear, but we're not addressing this other piece.

Jean: We've offered mentoring in that regard, but many don't even get to that point. So how much more clear do we have to be?

Chanel: Is there an agency in Vancouver?

Allison: It just started, but I don't know how much they're providing services.

Chanel: If there's a pool of people being trained, but don't have that skill of running their own independent business, there could be someone to coordinate all the pieces. At Strada we get them work so they don't have to go talk to Jo. We're the middle man so that Jo has people to do transcribing, and they'll have someone ... We're like a matchmaking service.

Jean: We hear that preference from coordinators too.

Chanel: One issue for coordinators, they're not just coordinating TypeWell, it could also be coordinating 50 people. It's a big mess. If they can receive those services from one place, with fair pricing and it works for the school ...

Allison: I don't know if schools are ready to pay those fees.

Chanel: The time spent coordinating is more expensive than handing it over to an agency.

If there's not enough work to sustain that person, they'll go somewhere else.

Tshombe: It's breaking down the numbers and presenting it.

Jean: They're not prepared to pay the level for the direct transcribing fee when they can get away with notetaking. So we have to prove that transcribing is what the students need and how to make that easy for them.

Chanel; Does Canada have something like ADA or Title 504 that makes it more legally bound?

Jean: Not as stringent or specific. We have a Charter of Human Rights, so in situations where students haven't complained and the institution is paying for lower cost providers, we need a big fat juicy law suit. But we haven't had that yet in terms of communication access.

Coordinators are confused as to the differences among CART, TypeWell and notetaking. In smaller institutions, they're also invigilating so they're only addressing priority issues and we're not always it. I think an agency would definitely help, especially in urban areas where the work is there, but coordination is difficult.

Chanel: It would be good if schools could pool their resources together.

Jean: We're starting to connect better with the school system, but we're two separate entities and we naively hoped that coordinators would do that and plan for upcoming students instead of waiting for September and be in a crisis.

It's not a priority. They'd have to talk to districts in terms of D/HH students. They're not always skilled in working with that population. Some regions are better than others. We get the data about students in the regions, but it's not becoming part of what people routinely collect so we're not scrambling.

Chanel: What about parents advocating?

Jean: Again, this is something where we need more advocacy and we're seeing it start to happen more. We hate to wait until it becomes a law suit but if that's what it takes. If it's not a crisis, there's a push to keep costs down.

Allison: Institution wages varies hugely. One might pay for \$40, or another for \$19. We can't control wages. It depends on individual institutions.

Chanel: How do they set their rates?

Jean: Collective agreements, if they bring people into the unions, and that's all over the map. Some institutions use contracts, while others who won't because of their union. It's part of salary negotiations. Competition makes a difference. There are three institutions in Victoria and people might choose to go somewhere else.

Allison: We also have provincial guidelines, but they're more guidelines than requirements.

Chanel: How does the rate compare with interpreters?

Allison: It's less but dual providers are usually paid their interpreting rates.

Chanel: I know they went through that at PCC.

Jean: When people need service providers they'll pay what the provider is asking.

Jo: If there's a class where I could use an interpreter but a transcriber is needed more, I'll pay the transcriber interpreter pay.

Jean: It depends on the institutions. You hire who you can get, the best people. Anyway, those are our frustrations. Anything you've learned in terms of what's worked?

Tshombe: We have the ADA and similar legislation. But I hear you talking about the expense of services where maybe the challenge is in terms of education, for access.
[Sentence deleted for clarity]

So it's more a matter of having the wrong conversation. It's access - of course we need talk about costs, but when people realize, that the person getting a notetaker thinks she's getting access, but she's not. We wait for a complaint, but there's no advocate. We run into that. So watching what our language is so we're talking about the same thing, that it's not a special privilege, what we're spending on students, etc.

Jo: How I talk to faculty is to ask what percentage of the dialogue does the notetaker get? Do you want to reduce their tuition accordingly? They're supposed to get full access. They can't participate real time.

Tshombe: That's a great point. How do they participate? We don't have to talk about TypeWell, but what are other options that are equivalent access as much as possible?

Jo: How do they participate in group projects?

Jean: It used to just be in the humanities.

Allison: Now it's every class.

Jo: That's when ambient noise goes way up.

Jean: You're on the ground and can have those discussions. We're trying to bring more administrators, deans, coordinators; we make presentations at institutions. From our provincial level, it's hard to have that discussion.

Jo: I predict that when coordinators start using TypeWell, I have the best means of communication access possible. I've had too many students come to my office with tears of joy when they first use TypeWell.

Tshombe: BC is progressive on lots of levels, but improvement is needed. For conferences and business people, and another conversation I was having with someone about cost is how providing access for people with disabilities creates an added value for people with all abilities.

We know that learning theory teaches about predominant learning styles and other types of learning/teaching components helps everyone. If in the classroom there's a screen where everyone is there, it becomes an added value and you bypass the nonsense of someone having an advantage over someone else.

Jo: At OSU we started accommodating faculty with hearing loss who have to lecture in big lecture halls. We have a transcriber there for that piece. It would be interesting to tell that instructor, we'll get you a notetaker. [Participants laughing.]

Jean: I presented at a conference for people with disabilities, and it was very ASL-based so we thought we'd get lambasted, but we were very much accepted because presenters/participants want notes.

Jo: Looks like we're running out of time. We seem to agree that the contracts aren't legally enforceable, but I've spoken with coordinators who do use contracts and make people pay the institution back for training if they don't stay for the contract length of time.

Tshombe: At Washington State, that's not unheard of.

Jean: When we first started out, we were told ask all you want, have people sign contracts but you can't compel them. Maybe we should ask again.

Thank you for coming.

[End of presentation.]