

## IN THE HUNT

## Some Words About Interpreting

By BRENT BOWERS

**I**t is high time to dethrone “plastics” as the most famous one-word career tip in history. On the 40th anniversary of the release of “The Graduate,” in which Dustin Hoffman puzzled over that advice, I would urge fledgling entrepreneurs to consider one of the most lucrative hidden-in-plain-sight niches of the global economy.

Interpreters.

O.K., that may not have quite the same ring, but think about it. While everybody else is talking about booming international markets for information technology, banking, jetliners and fast-food restaurants, who are the mechanics who keep the machinery of world trade humming?

The people who enable speakers of English, French, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and every other language from Arabic to Zulu to understand one another, that's who. As a result, a cottage industry of small and medium-size language-services companies is quietly flourishing in this country. Here is a glance at two of them:

Kathleen Diamond founded Language Learning Enterprise in Alexandria, Va., in 1979 almost by accident. Fluent in English, French and Spanish, she had always been encouraged by her father, a corporate executive, to “think beyond the obvious possibilities,” she said. But she never considered herself entrepreneurial material.

Au contraire, she seemed to be coasting in early adulthood along a predictable middle-class path, marrying, having two children and holding down intermittent teaching jobs.

Then, the proverbial light bulb went off. In 1979, Berlitz offered her \$4.25 an hour to teach French to students who were paying \$25 each for the lesson. Assuming a class of 10 students, well, you do the math.

“It was that huge gap that set off something in me,” she said.

Fate gave her a push. By chance, she said, she saw a newspaper ad for a program for women on starting businesses. She enrolled and before long opened a language-instruction company for adults.

Her first federal government contract was with the United States Information Agency. It asked to see her facility. Facility? What facility? Before you could say the proverbial “la plume de ma tante est sur la table de mon oncle,” she cut a deal to rent a church's Sun-

day School classrooms on weekdays.

From that beginning, she branched out into translation, then into sending interpreters to hospitals and the like and finally, in what was to become her big moneymaker, into providing interpretation services over the phone.

Today, Language Learning's 35 employees manage 3,000 interpreters and translators, most of them in the United States, Britain and Canada, but also in Argentina, Russia, China, India and other countries. These independent contractors can be called on at a moment's notice to assist Language Learning's clients, which include the Homeland Security Department, major corporations, financial institutions, hospitals and numerous states and counties.

Most of the interpreters hired by Language Learning are immigrants, and most live in the United States because, Ms. Diamond says, they have to understand American lingo, culture and traditions.

She foresees a golden age for language services. Right now, her venture centers on interpreting English into Spanish, followed by Mandarin Chinese, Korean and Russian. But she considers China to be a land of opportunity, with Mandarin eventually becoming a rival to English at the center of the linguistic orbit — just as China is emerging as an economic force that is expected to play a larger and larger role in the global marketplace.

**M**s. Diamond, who is 60, says Language Learning is on track to take in \$9 million in revenue this year, up from \$5.8 million last year, a turning point after years of gradual gains. She says her profit margins are “strong.”

“We've reached the stage where we can say this company has real staying power,” she said. “So let's let her rip!”

It is doubtful, however, that she will ever catch up with her far bigger competitor, Language Line Services, the world's leading over-the-phone interpretation provider. The privately held company is based in Monterey, Calif. Louis Provenzano, Language Line's chief executive, recently started an effort to double his full-time work force to 6,000 from 3,000 over two years, and expects revenue to increase at a similar pace. He says his company is “highly profitable.”

No wonder: The market potential for language services in the United States is huge

and growing, but the industry, which is made up of mostly small niche players, can't keep up with the demand. It doesn't even have a trade association.

Mr. Provenzano says that Language Line has 20,000 customers around the world, including hospitals, police departments and credit card companies, with its biggest presence in English-speaking countries. He says his interpreters help police officers and other emergency workers deliver an average of 10 babies a day.

Why the explosion in demand? “Every 31 seconds, another immigrant enters the U.S.,” he said. “One fifth of the people who live in the U.S. speak another language than English at home.”

Moreover, he adds, “those global companies that offer their services in potential customers' native language are four times more likely to make a sale than competitors who do not.”

To that end, Language Line (started 25 years ago by a police officer named Jeff Munks, with a business partner, out of his frustration in trying to communicate with Vietnamese refugees) has joined forces with AT&T to offer the public a free service called Your World, Your Language. The service, now being test-marketed in California, allows users to choose one of nine languages to communicate with service providers from banks and insurance firms to telephone and utility companies.

In partnership with Verizon Communications, Language Line also recently began marketing a prepaid card called Verizon Interpretation aimed at American business travelers abroad who can use it to gain instant access to interpreters of English into any language.

Israel Hernandez, who runs the U.S. Commercial Service, a part of the Commerce Department that promotes exports, notes that more than 70 percent of the world's purchasing power lies outside the United States.

“With English being the language of international business,” he said, “Language Learning Enterprise and Language Line Services have indeed found a potential pot of gold.”

*Brent Bowers, a longtime small-business editor at The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, is author of The Eight Patterns of Highly Effective Entrepreneurs, now out in paperback (Doubleday).*