

Summary of Preliminary Findings

Survey of Interpreters Experience with Virtual Sitings of Parliament (Survey conducted between April 29 and May 13, 2021)

Background

The Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE) conducted a survey of interpreters to capture the impact of remote interpretation on their working conditions, since Parliament started virtual sittings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This document summarizes the findings.

The survey was issued to 73 registered members who are part of the TR classification and a record 44 or 60% responded.

Prior to this survey, CAPE has, on numerous occasions, brought up with various MPs the challenges interpreters have faced and continue to face. CAPE has also appeared before the Procedure and House Affairs Committee (PROC) and submitted a brief to the Official Languages Committee (LANG).

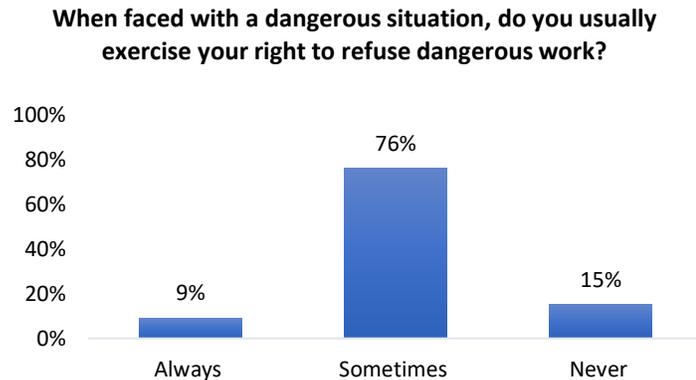
The preliminary findings of the survey revealed a significant increase in Remote Simultaneous Interpretation (RSI) since the start of virtual sitting of Parliament, unsafe working conditions which hurt or injured the interpreters or put them at risk of injury, and the gloomy outlook if working conditions do not improve.

Key takeaways:

1. **Increase in RSI:** With the COVID-19 pandemic, interpreters spend more time than ever doing RSI. Indeed, respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent on RSI before and after March 20, 2020. The majority of respondents (83%) were spending less than 25% of their time in the booth interpreting remotely before the pandemic. However, since March 2020, this trend has seen a drastic change, with most interpreters (85%) now providing RSI between 76% and 100% of their time.
2. **Health and safety concerns:** RSI is often performed in a context that is unsafe for interpreters. Four respondents out of five (79%) have been in a situation that they perceived to be dangerous according to the *Canada Labour Code* while performing RSI. In almost all cases, the hazardous situation described resulted from the poor sound quality and audio feedback risk.

According to the *Canada Labour Code*, workers can exercise their right to refuse dangerous work. Still, only 9% of interpreters always exercise their right to refuse service when faced with a dangerous situation. At the same time, 76% of interpreters mentioned that they sometimes refuse work deemed unsafe, and 15% never used this right. When asked why they are not using their right to refuse dangerous work, more than half (55%) responded that they felt pressured to continue. This pressure came mainly from the fear of angering

clients, who are often high-ranking figures, such as senior management or members of Parliament, and disrupting important events (e.g., important meetings or sensitive testimony). Several respondents (21%) also mentioned that it is often challenging to assess whether the poor sound quality can present a risk for health. Interpreters often realize the risk incurred only after their assignment.

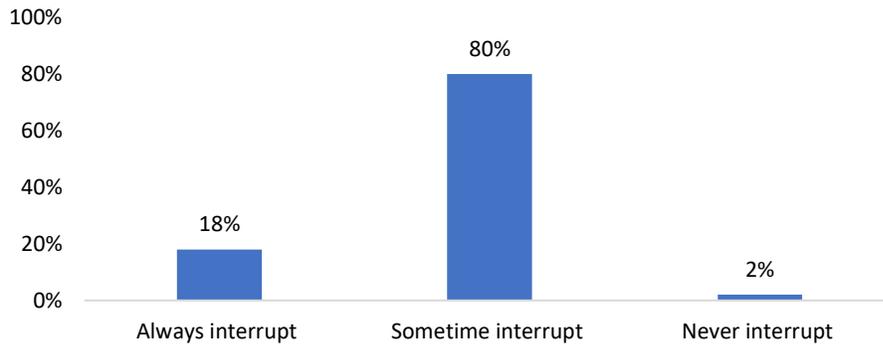


Despite management's instruction to interrupt service if interpreters perceive that the situation represents a risk for their health and safety, few do so, even if warranted. Indeed, only 18% of interpreters indicated that they always interrupt service when faced with sound quality issues, while most (80%) mentioned that they sometimes interrupt service. The main reasons that push interpreters to continue interpreting, despite management's instructions, are the following:

- The speech has been provided so that the interpreter can read it (80%);
- The speaker is high-profile (78%);
- Respondents think they can tough it out, but the interpreter realized afterward they should have stopped (75%);
- Sound quality varies so much that sometimes continuing is doable (73%);
- Respondents do not realize while interpreting that the sound is bad (65%).

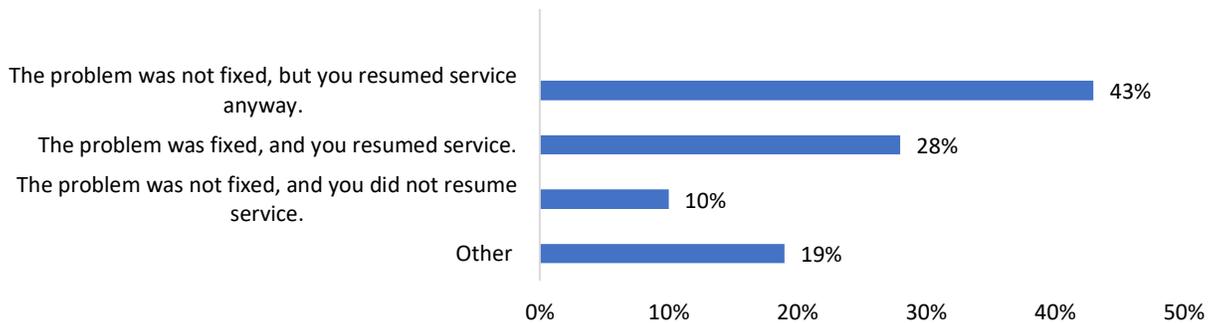
The risk of receiving negative feedback could also motivate interpreters not to interrupt service. Three-quarters of respondents (75%) stated having received negative feedback from clients (MPs, senators, witnesses) or others (clerks, technicians, colleagues) due to interruptions.

When faced with sound quality issues that warrant an interruption of service during RSI, you will:



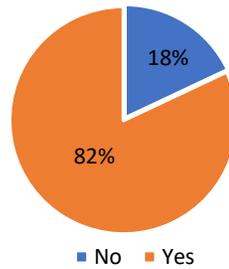
Nonetheless, most interpreters (93%) indicated having interrupted service because of a risk due to poor sound quality in an RSI context. Despite efforts to fix the problems, the interpreter often resumes service even though the sound issue is only partially or not at all corrected. When asked about the last time they interrupted service because of poor sound quality, 43% of interpreters mentioned that they resumed service even if the problem persisted.

If you think about the last time you interrupted service because of a risk of poor sound quality in an RSI context, what happened after service was interrupted?



- Incidents and Injuries:** Since the start of virtual Parliament, close to three-quarters of interpreters (72%) have reported being hurt or injured while interpreting. Most interpreters (79%) indicated having filed at least one hazardous occurrence report for sound issues since March 2020, with an average of 3.2 hazardous occurrence reports per respondent. A slightly higher proportion of interpreters (82%) have developed hearing-related problems such as tinnitus, ear pain or hyperacusis since Parliament has gone virtual. Of those who reported a hearing-related problem, 78% needed to take leave to attend to the subsequent health issue.

Since Parliament has gone virtual, have you developed any hearing-related problems?



These hazardous working conditions also have repercussions on mental health. Most interpreters (87%) experienced high or very high levels of stress when performing RSI. Regrettably, 7.5% of respondents experienced stress levels so high that they had to take a leave of absence to cope. Moreover, nearly 90% of respondents have experienced cognitive fatigue, most of whom had to take a leave of absence to recuperate.

4. **Current and future concerns:** Although most respondents (84%) have seen some improvements in RSI working conditions since May 2020, nine out of ten (90%) continue to experience enduring sound and technical issues that affect their health and safety.

Faced with this lack of improvement, interpreters are worried about their health. Respondents are unanimously concerned about developing job-related hearing loss in the future. Most of them (92%) are also concerned about burnout due to cognitive fatigue. In the long term, the Bureau could lose many of its interpreters. Seven out of ten interpreters (69%) indicated that they were considering leaving their jobs earlier than expected if the current RSI working conditions persists.

There are several possible solutions to explore. When interpreters were asked about what could be done to better protect them at work, most comments (61%) mentioned ensuring that minimum requirements are met when performing RSI. These requirements include the use of ISO-approved equipment, such as headphones for participants, and ensuring that all meeting participants have a good quality internet connection (*e.g.*, an Ethernet connection, and not a Wi-Fi connection). Some have even suggested that RSI should not take place if these minimum conditions are not met. Other comments (21%) also mentioned reducing the number of RSI working hours. And finally, a few comments (12%) suggested that the responsibility for interrupting a session should not rest with the interpreter who is currently working but rather with a third party.