Conference equipment

Technical Committee.
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The sound system and the interpreter's control panel

Standards:

ISO 2603:1998: Built-in simultaneous interpretation booths

IEC 60914:1988 (International Electrotechnical Comission): Conference systems

The best advice in a constantly changing situation is to consult the THC on what is currently the best available equipment.

The THC works closely with SI equipment manufacturers to help overcome the problem of poorly designed equipment that does not comply with the Standards. The THC also offers advice on other ergonomic details important in the design of control panels although not specified in the Standards.

Remember: An unfortunate choice of SI equipment will blight the life of a whole generation of interpreters and their audiences. No management is going to be persuaded to find money to replace apparently new, little used equipment, however useless it may be. So please consult the THC.

The interpreter's control panel (8, 9)

An important design item is that "listening" and "speaking" controls not be confused. One way is to confine them to distinct areas on the panel. The controls most frequently used should be easily accessed (e.g., microphone on/off, tone control, etc.).

Channels

      - Multiple incoming and outgoing channels

- Selectors for outgoing and incoming channels should be easy to distinguish from each other.

- 1 outgoing channel per language plus floor channel

Microphones

- Individual microphones for all interpreters

- If the microphone is fixed to the control panel, it should have a long enough flexible stem so the interpreter is not forced to adopt a rigid or awkward position.

- Microphone control: a switch easily distinguishable from other controls (a different colour, for example)

- A "microphone-on" light: an easily visible ring around the mike or a prominent light on the console

Other panel items

- Tone controls to adjust bass and treble settings according to individual preferences and different speakers' voices

- Automatic, pre-selected relay

- A "cough button" (mute button)

All controls should operate silently.

Earphones (10)

- Individual earphones for all interpreters

- High-quality and lightweight, designed for interpreters (not the kind designed for singers or journalists)

- No in-the-ear headphones--for interpreters or delegates

- Provide audio frequencies from 125-12,500 Hz

Headsets with microphone incorporated are not recommended for permanent installation. Opinions are too divided on their use, although they can be made available to interpreters who prefer them. Some flatly refuse to use them.

The importance of sound

Good sound quality in the booth and in the conference room is an essential factor in simultaneous interpretation.

Poor sound causes unnecessary stress and fatigue.

Good sound depends on many factors, among others:

-proper sound equipment that supplies the full range of sound: 125-12,500 Hz

- good-quality, lightweight earphones

- room acoustics

- loudspeakers distributed around the room and volume kept low enough

Some important details:

Infrared and fully cabled systems are the systems of choice.

A loudspeaker installed on the control panel or somewhere in the booth can be extremely useful for following the speaker while your channel is occupied by relay from another booth, or when the booth is at rest, to be able to follow with the headphones off.

- It must be equipped with volume control, which should be within easy reach of the seated interpreters.

- It should switch off automatically when the microphone is opened.

It is always wise to provide for more channels than the number of built-in booths. Extra channels can be useful to accommodate additional languages working from mobile booths.

There should be one complete set of controls and headphones per interpreter

Control panels may be sunken into the table-top or free-standing; however, the panel should be at a slight angle for easier access.

If the control panel is built into the table, it should be placed toward the front edge leaving at least 40 cm of free space (preferably more) for documents, writing, etc.

Headphone cables should pass under the table and be secured under the free edge of the table to avoid getting entangled. The rough requirement is to leave 1.5 m of free cord, although a useful rule of thumb is that the interpreter should be able to reach the document shelves easily, wherever they are in the booth, without having to remove the headphones.

The headphone plug should be secure and not protrude to avoid getting bumped or caught in clothing.