# Love's labour's found? A data-driven exploration of job quality among UK-based freelance translators

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## Abstract

Recent technological, economic, and organisational developments have placed freelance translation in the United Kingdom under growing strain, raising critical questions about job quality, sustainability, and the continued meaningfulness of translational work. This article presents a data-driven analysis of job quality among UK-based freelance translators, bringing Translation Studies into dialogue with labour economics through the application of the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) job quality framework and the broader concept of meaningful work. Drawing on survey data from the exploratory Chasing Status project (n = 216), the study combines descriptive statistical analysis with thematically coded qualitative data to assess seven intrinsic and extrinsic job quality dimensions, namely earnings, working time quality, prospects, skills and discretion, work intensity, social environment, and physical environment. The findings paint a largely negative picture of job quality for UK freelance translators, with particularly strong dissatisfaction regarding earnings and future prospects. Both are perceived as being eroded by ongoing technological disruption, market concentration, and downward price pressure. While working time quality and aspects of skills use remain relatively positive, rising work intensity, diminished autonomy, and deteriorating social and physical environments increasingly undermine translators' professional agency. Notably, the results confirm a persistent motivation-satisfaction paradox; despite broadly negative assessments of job quality, a majority of respondents continue to describe their work as fulfilling. We argue that this paradox risks masking structural precarity and the gradual erosion of the conditions necessary for meaningful work. Situating freelance translation within wider debates on job quality, self-employment, and digital labour, we contend that there is an urgent need for collective, policy-oriented, and empirically grounded responses to safeguard the profession's long-term sustainability.

# 1. Introduction

For anyone who follows the fortunes of translators, whether that be via industry reports, research, or even social media feeds, it should come as no surprise that freelance translation is facing significant upheaval. For all the vaunted benefits of self-employment, working as a freelancer is proving to be a double-edged sword for some. One of the participants of the research reported in this article remarked that their work had "stopped feeling challenging or meaningful", while another described it as a "labour of love". Both comments flag clear issues and echo well-documented concerns over the longer-term sustainability of the industry (Lambert and Walker 2024), which we explore in detail in this article. We achieve this by engaging on a preliminary basis with the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (henceforth, Eurofound) classification of job quality and the concept of 'meaningful work' (Spencer 2015). In doing so, we bolster the growing body of literature blending ideas from translation studies (TS) and labour economics. Indeed, our approach adds a new dimension to TS' engagement with 'work' and 'labour' (e.g., Zwischenberger and Alfer 2022) as it brings new data to bear on a range of intrinsic and extrinsic criteria that allow us to evaluate UK freelance translators' job quality. As such, we address an important gap in the literature (see Zwischenberger and Alfer 2022, 21; and Fırat et al. 2024, 4), as we use empirical data to interrogate prior conceptual arguments and more anecdotal vox-pop surveys, such as Slator's recent claim (2024) that many translators consider post-editing "tedious and mind-numbing". Our approach allows us to reflect on the meaningfulness of freelance translation in the UK and to situate it in the wider spectrum of job quality, inviting further reflections within and beyond the realm of translation.

We begin by reviewing key components constituting the meaning of work, exploring concepts including sustainability, translator job satisfaction and motivation, and 'work' in TS, before turning to labour economics and the Eurofound framework. We then employ this framework to analyse the survey data from our exploratory *Chasing Status* project.[1] Our findings suggest that the basis for meaningful work, i.e. underlying job quality, is being seriously eroded and recent developments may soon lead to a tipping point for many UK-based freelance translators.

[1] See https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/directory-record/1872/chasing-status-the-sustainability-of-the-freelance-translation-profession-in-the-united-kingdom.

# 2. Contextualising the meaning of work for translators

## 2.1 Professional sustainability and the translation industry

There have been increasing concerns surrounding the sustainabilityof freelance translation as a career recently (as well as the translation industry more generally), not only in academic contexts, but also in industry and the translation classroom (Pym 2026; Walker and Lambert 2024).[2] While many industry reports have tended to depict relatively healthy growth (Nimdzi 2024), this optimism has been tempered by a decline in the size of the sector, especially in the 'human translation' market, where further decline is predicted (CSA 2024, 19). Ongoing technological developments, notably in generative AI (GenAI) and machine translation (MT), and the resulting automation creep continue to stimulate change across the industry, disrupting workflows and fuelling polarising narratives within and beyond translation (Fırat et al. 2024; Giustini 2024; Peng 2024). Admittedly, these challenges are not translation-specific, with the technological advancements underpinning gig economy-style platforms remoulding the very nature of work in the digital economy (Fayard, 2019, 207). However, Digital Taylorism – defined by Moorkens as technology-enabled "monitoring and surveillance of workers to ensure that their role is carried out as expected" (2020, 16) – can now be seen to represent "the major performative ritual in today's translation workflow" (Baumgarten 2024, 170). Hence, "modern digital translational labour [...] carries a heavy load of alienated labour" (172) as it undermines translators' autonomy. Under such conditions:

> The honest question that must be asked here is whether anyone with sufficient economic and financial means would seriously want to indulge in stressful, tedious, and indeed "boring and demeaning" (Moorkens and O'Brien 2017: 110) activities such as postediting translation, and this generally for pretty low wages? (178)

Undoubtedly, deteriorating pay and working conditions combine to create an uninviting occupational environment. Carreira (2024a, 2) provides a concise breakdown of factors contributing to "worsening working conditions in the language services industry", such as clients imposing poor rates and unjustifiably tight deadlines. This summary feeds into other vital human factors when discussing the sustainability of translation, including increased consciousness of wellbeing concerns, "now considered an essential part of a sustainable life and career" (Hubscher-Davidson and Panichelli-Batalla 2025, 444). However, in societies such as the UK that have adopted a neoliberal economic model, the dominant discourse is increasingly that individuals are responsible for their own wellbeing, whether financial and otherwise (Harvey 2005, 2). Such discourse further

[2] We borrow the UN definition of sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (UNWCED, 1987), which clearly includes environmental as well as socio-economic concerns. Due to space constraints, this article focuses solely on the latter, and specifically on issues of human capital sustainability.

propagates the perception of "humans as self-reliant, individualized, and proactive decision-makers, essentially framing them as self-entrepreneurs and embodiments of human capital" (Niu 2024, 61). And yet, gig work, precarity, and mechanistic workflows leave an increasing number of freelance translators feeling like a cog in a machine (Moorkens 2020). As anticipated by Baumgarten's "honest question" above, this could cause short- and long-term retention issues in translation, potentially putting the industry's very sustainability in jeopardy (Lambert and Walker 2024; Moorkens et al. 2024; van Egdom 2024).

## 2.2 Translators' job satisfaction

Unsurprisingly, therefore, translators' job satisfaction – how translators feel about their job – has also received increasing attention over the last decade (Ruokonen and Svahn 2024, 8) from a variety of perspectives: ergonomics (e.g., Ehrensberger-Dow and Hunziker Heeb 2016; Ehrensberger-Dow 2019), translation psychology (e.g., Bolaños-Medina 2016 and 2023; Courtney and Phelan 2019), socio-economics (e.g., Dam and Zethsen 2016; Lambert and Walker 2024; Moorkens 2020; Risku and Rogl 2022). Most studies are based on surveys or reviews of existing academic and grey literature, and, while many present freelance translators as increasingly alienated, underpaid, overworked, and forced to take on "tedious and mind-numbing" post-editing work (Alonso & Nunes Vieira 2020, 398; see also Fırat et al. 2024; Moorkens 2020), others find that job satisfaction remains surprisingly high overall (Ruokonen and Svahn 2024, 24; see also, Ruokonen et al., 2020, for government translators). However, this satisfaction is primarily the result of "job-intrinsic" factors (e.g., the nature of the work, tasks and responsibilities, the innately rewarding nature of the job, etc.) (Ruokonen and Svahn 2024, 12) and, when it comes to "job-extrinsic factors" (e.g., pay, working hours, stress, workflows, professional interactions, etc.), the picture is more mixed (24). Indeed, while "interpersonal relationships, autonomy and recognition" have been shown to contribute positively to job satisfaction among translators, "industrialisation and technologization" cause increasing dissatisfaction (ibid.).

Given this striking juxtaposition of general job satisfaction and money, time, and well-being pressures, Lambert and Walker (2024, 90) identified a "motivation-satisfaction paradox" in freelance translation, where clear and worrying deficiencies in translators' needs are somewhat mitigated by positive "pulls", including the job-intrinsic sense of fulfilment from translation work itself. Zwischenberger and Alfer's (2022, 205) definitions of "labour" and "work" echo this paradox, with labour seen as a process that creates "a machine-like individual who just performs a job [and] is easily replaceable", while work "gives an opportunity to create a self that is human and does something meaning- and impactful". Such conceptualisations highlight the important role that

labour studies and concepts of work can play in advancing our understandings of these relationships. According to labour economist David Spencer, a reason behind this apparent paradox may lie within the controversial nature of "happiness economics" itself, which has embraced job satisfaction data to measure the subjective well-being of workers (2015, 680). In Spencer's view, a "utility-centred view of work" is problematic because:

> [it] takes us down the track of seeing work as just a conduit to positive or negative subjective feeling; we may as well be talking about a drug as talking about work. Work's importance in the realisation of human creative needs and its potential role as a source of positive status and ultimately self-realisation get lost in the focus on the subjective feelings experienced by people through work. (2015, 680)

Following Spencer, we may need to move beyond happiness-at-work surveys. Indeed, although such empirical instruments "offer rich accounts of how practices are shaped by evolving sociotechnical contexts, they often set aside the question of what work is" (Fayard 2019, 207). Or, in Spencer's words, "these data cannot ever tell us definitively whether people are achieving a fulfilling and meaningful life at work" (Spencer 2015, 681). If we want to find out whether being a freelance translator remains a fulfilling and meaningful job, we need to first explore the building blocks of what constitutes high-quality work from the workers' perspective.

## 3. Job quality and (meaningful) work

Spencer bemoans the fact that mainstream economics mostly defines work as "an activity people do in order to satisfy their consumption wants" (2015, 675). Work is thus primarily a "disutility" in that "people suffer some personal loss through the act of work that leads them to demand some compensation for the time they give to work" (676). In contrast, Spencer (2015, 681) contends that Marx, for instance, would view work "as an activity through which people can express their creativity and achieve self-realisation". However, Marx also stressed that, in capitalist societies, a lack of control over the work activity or the means of production can alienate workers (Fayard 2021, 209). Were we to apply Marx's definition of work to UK freelance translators, the reported lack of control over the type of translation work they do, or how they produce it, would suggest that they can no longer realise themselves through their work.

Despite this backdrop, Zwischenberger and Alfer (2022, 212) argue that the relatively high satisfaction rates mentioned above are perhaps "indicative of translation being experienced as satisfying, meaningful and humanising work". However, they rightly add that this could also reflect among translators (212-213):

> a narrative that foregrounds work and its emotional and social rewards while strategically masking the dimension of labour operative in producing translations whose exchange-value is appropriated by those holding substantial stakes in the means of production, resulting in […] the "voluntary servitude" that characterises translators' professional habitus.

Instead of opposing work and labour, of seeing freelance translation either as *just* work or *just* labour, we agree with Zwischenberger and Alfer (2022) that translation constitutes *both* work and labour. To this end, using the indicators developed by the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound 2012) to explore job quality could help us move beyond such dichotomies. It could help us to approximate where translation sits on a cline of job quality (in relation to other job profiles), to pinpoint factors contributing to or diminishing quality, satisfaction, and motivation, and ultimately to reflect on whether being a freelance translator can be seen as "meaningful work" (Spencer 2015).

Meaningful work is work that "not only meets our consumption wants but also meets our needs for freedom and creativity; it is work that enables us to develop and realise our potential" (2015, 676). This concept "entails seeing work in terms of the needs of workers and asks us to consider whether work matches up to those needs" (685). While recognising that the meaningfulness of work will also "be dependent on the context of work" (683), Spencer nonetheless believes that it is possible to define meaningful work "in relation to the characteristics of jobs that exist in the economy" (ibid.), with reference to certain (quasi-)objective markers of job quality. According to Spencer, it is important for work to remain meaningful for individuals because meaningless work, i.e. work that is "mundane and repetitive", has been shown to negatively impact individuals' well-being, leading to "boredom", "fatigue", "stress", and acute mental and physical health problems (684).

Empirical measurement of such concepts, however, can prove problematic. In sociological and economic studies focusing on the future of work, increasing attention has been paid to "job quality" (Berg et al. 2023), a conceptualisation that recognises the influence of various job characteristics on the fulfilment of different personal and professional needs. As Berg et al. note (350), job quality is strongly related to "decent work" (elaborated by the International Labour Organization, now incorporated into the UN's Sustainable Development Goals), but also shares touchpoints with concepts that have begun to be addressed by TS scholars. One example is "fair work" (Fairwork 2022; see Fırat et al. 2024), which operates more from the perspective of an enterprise fulfilling statutory duties than an individual worker enjoying what are often seen as preferential facets of work afforded by progressive human resource policies. Job quality also sits at the heart of a constellation of related concepts (see Figure 1), as explored by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in a comprehensive literature review of concepts encompassed by "job quality"

(CIPD 2018, 3). In this review, the CIPD explain that "job quality" is ultimately an umbrella term covering a number of sub-concepts (white triangles in Figure 1), which range from 'needs' (at the bottom of the pyramid) to 'wants' (at the top), and also tend to be protected via legal frameworks (at the bottom of the pyramid) but move upwards to preferential decisions and policies to support worker culture (at the top of the pyramid). Despite variations and differences in terminology across these concepts, the CIPD considers "job quality" to be the most comprehensive, holistic term that sits at the centre of this conceptual space as a means to describe influences on an individual's experience of their working conditions.

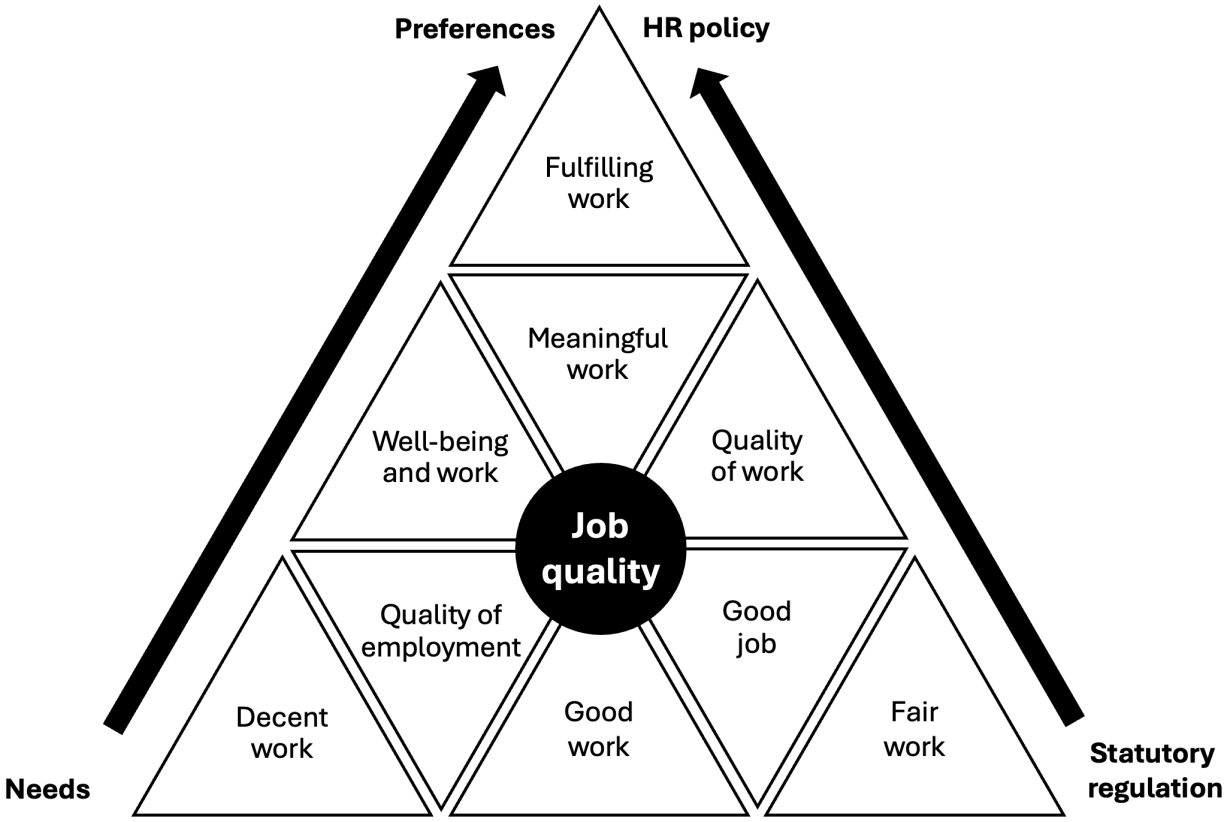


**Figure 1. Hierarchy of job-quality-related concepts (adapted from CIPD 2017, 27)**

Job quality, as defined by Eurofound (2012) and later adopted by the European Parliament to monitor labour market conditions (Berg et al. 2023, 350), comprises three extrinsic factors – Earnings, Working Time Quality, and Prospects – and four intrinsic factors – Skills and Discretion, Work Intensity, Social Environment, and Physical Environment.

On the extrinsic side, **Earnings** covers levels of pay (earnings, for self-employment) and the degree to which income needs support a certain standard of living. It also encompasses pay being commensurate with the effort, skill, and risk involved in the job. **Working Time Quality** should be

viewed "in relation to the expected extent to which the working time meets workers' needs for work-life balance" (Eurofound 2012, 14). Factors affecting this criterion are "duration" (weekly working hours), "scheduling" (e.g., antisocial hours), the degree of "discretion over working-time arrangements", as well as "short-term flexibility" (e.g., ability to take time off for family reasons) (24). Finally, **Prospects** (21) covers both job security (likelihood of job loss) and career prospects more generally, with "[g]ood prospects […] found in jobs which offer high job security and the potential for future earnings growth" (Berg et al. 2023, 350).

For the intrinsic factors, **Skills and Discretion** considers workers' use of their skills, including "task complexity, problem-solving, computer use frequency, employer-provided training, on-the-job training, and learning participation" (Eurofound 2012, 22). An important facet of this factor is worker discretion "over both the work itself and its timing" (ibid.). **Work Intensity** "refers to the intensity of labour effort during work time" (14) and covers having to work at very high speed and/or to tight deadlines, having enough time to get things done, and the number of sources of work pressure (23). The third intrinsic factor is **Social Environment**, as a job's social environment contributes to "meeting people's needs and […] generating well-being" (14). While support from line managers, colleagues, or clients contributes to a good social environment, abusive workplaces make for toxic social environments. For the purposes of our research, we include in this criterion social isolation, a recurrent issue in freelance translation specifically, which can have a detrimental effect on psychological wellbeing (Penet, 2024). We have also expanded Eurofound's definition (relating primarily to employers and co-workers) to cover the wider social environment of the general public, and how this influences the environment in which translators operate. The final intrinsic factor, **Physical Environment**, is related to environmental hazards and posture-related risks (23).

In the sections that follow, we apply this framework to freelance translation in the UK, with a view to evaluating job quality among this group, first beginning with an explanation of how the data were collected and some of the characteristics of our survey sample.

# 4. Data collection

An online questionnaire was distributed to a sample of Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) and Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) members in October 2023. For the ITI, 1,100 members (excluding student members) were chosen at random and contacted by email; for the CIOL, all members were invited to participate via the CIOL's regular "Monthly Update" email. In total, 331

usable responses were collected.[3] Here, we have limited our analysis to data from UK residents only (n = 216). The questionnaire collected demographic and professional characteristics alongside insights into respondents' perceptions of income, status, working conditions, and general feelings about the profession collected via a mixture of closed and open questions. While some of the questions were newly designed, specifically with the objectives of this research project in mind, many questions were adapted from, or at least inspired by, the questionnaires employed by Dam and Zethsen (2008, 2011, 2016) and Ruokonen and Makisalo (2018) and by our previous conceptual exploration of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Lambert and Walker 2024).[4]

### 4.1 Participant profiles

Of the 216 UK-based respondents, 168 (77.8%) were women, 45 (20.8%) men, two non-binary, and one preferring not to answer, reflecting the typical industry gender distribution. The mean age was 50.4 (SD = 14.4), and the three most populous age brackets were 35-44 (n = 46), 45-54 (n = 47), and 55-64 (n = 47). The mean experience in translation was 16.4 years (SD = 12.2), but >26 years was the most common response (n = 52). The majority of respondents worked full-time as freelance translators (n = 127), 49 worked part-time, and 30 worked part-time as a translator alongside other employment; ten respondents described themselves as "occasional" translators. In terms of association membership, 116 were ITI members, 35 were CIOL members, and 59 were members of both the ITI and CIOL. Regarding their source of work, 73 worked predominantly for LSPs (of which 54 exclusively for LSPs), 23 had a balanced portfolio of LSP and direct client work, and 47 worked predominantly for direct clients (19 exclusively for direct clients). Our sample mirrors the typical demographics of freelance translators who are mostly middle-aged and mostly women (Penet 2025, 44). However, its worth noting the potential under-representation of younger freelancer translators in surveys, in part because they are less likely to be members of professional associations and because of their lower level of industry awareness (Penet 2025, 44). This is particularly relevant when discussing the long-term sustainability of freelance translation.

### 4.2 Data handling

The quantitative data from closed questions were analysed with descriptive statistics and used to complement the interpretation of the textual data generated from the open-text questions. When

[3] Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds on 28 June 2023 (reference LTSLCS-163).
[4] The full list of questions in the questionnaire can be consulted at: https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/download/downloads/id/1006/questionnaire-and-focus-group-prompts.pdf

reporting such data in the sections that follow, we indicate the number of responses to the relevant question, as not all respondents answered all questions.

The qualitative open-text data were thematically coded with a mixed deductive and inductive approach: first deductively based on the aforementioned seven Eurofound (2012) criteria, alongside a sentiment analysis (positive, neutral, negative) of the corresponding statement; then inductively centring around the causes, factors, or reasons justifying the criterion and the sentiment. These inductive codes covered topics such as technology, changes in the market, economic and social factors, professionalisation, and the (under)valuation of translation.

Specifically, there were two steps to the coding process for each open-text question (11 questions in total, excluding demographic or profile-related questions). The response was first coded for the relevant job quality criteria and sentiment evoked, and subsequently in terms of the reasons or causes of this attitude inferred from the response. Author 2 first coded the whole response (ranging from 10-20 words in some cases to 100 words or more in others) under one or more of the Job Quality criteria and assigned a sentiment rating to each code. The coding was then verified by Authors 1 and 3 and any discrepancies discussed and adjusted. In parallel, Author 2 inductively devised a number of themes that reflected the causes or reasons for the positive, negative, or neutral sentiments. A preliminary codebook was devised based on this initial round of coding by Author 2, debated by the project team, and then revised jointly by Authors 1 and 3 to generate the final deductive codes.

Because the survey contained optional open-text questions, not all questions were answered by all participants; these cases were not factored into the calculation of frequency statistics reported below. In addition, for some responses, more than one job quality criterion and/or thematic cause would be tagged. For instance, in response to a question inviting comment on satisfaction with income, one respondent commented with a response that was coded under Earnings (negative sentiment) and Prospects (negative sentiment), in terms of Job Quality criteria evoked, and Volume of Work and Supplementing Income, in terms of the reasons or causes for these sentiments. In some cases, one job quality criterion might be evoked in a positive light, while another might be mentioned in a negative light within the same response. As such, when interpreting the data below, it is important to note that the figures reflect only those responses that evoke the specific job quality criteria, sentiment and thematic codes in question. As with most open-text question data collection in such studies, the figures cannot reflect the entire respondent sample.

It is also important to note that our questionnaire did not employ Eurofound's own questions and was not originally designed with the Eurofound criteria in mind. Rather, we applied these criteria

*post-hoc*, using both open and closed responses to explore indicators of the various factors within the criteria. Consequently, there was a disparity in the amount of data coded under each of the seven criteria, which we address in the sections that follow. For instance, the focus of our questions and the easily quantifiable nature of earnings meant that more data were available for this criterion. The reported trends and quantifications should therefore be interpreted somewhat cautiously. However, the Eurofound framework's transparent criteria meant that our coding was targeted and, ultimately, this framework provided a robust orienting tool allowing us to evaluate the quality of freelance translation work and situate it on a continuum of job quality.

# 5. Findings

## 5.1 Extrinsic criteria

### 5.1.1 Earnings

Self-reported earnings data yielded a median full-time-adjusted (37.5 hours) revenue of £32,812 and profit of £28,125. For comparison, at the time of data collection, the annual nominal median salary in the UK for postgraduates was £45,000, graduates £40,000, and non-graduates £29,500 (Graduate Labour Market Statistics 2024), meaning that the reported median revenue and profit fell either side of the UK median *non-graduate* salary, despite 151 (69.9%) of our sample holding a postgraduate qualification, and 200 (92.6%) holding a graduate qualification. Most respondents reported being very (17.1%) or somewhat dissatisfied (39.8%) with their income; 16.2% were neither dissatisfied nor satisfied; and 20.8% and 6.0% were somewhat or very satisfied respectively (n = 216).

Reflecting on their earnings, 127 respondents in total (58.8%) considered themselves very low (13.4%), low (19.4%), or low-to-average earners (25.9%); 56 (25.9%) considered themselves average earners, and only 33 (15.3%) as average-to-high (10.6%) or high (4.6%) earners (n = 216). No respondents considered themselves very high earners. An overwhelming majority felt that they would earn more money in another job requiring a similar level of education (87.0%) (n = 216) or a similar level of experience (88.4%) (n = 215). Furthermore, most respondents felt that they either had no agency (22.2%) or only a little agency (59.7%) to negotiate higher rates with their clients (n = 214).

The qualitative data further intensifies the strength of negative sentiment surrounding earnings. Out of 419 open-text responses coded under Earnings, only 30 (7.2%) were positive and 55 (13.1%) neutral; the remaining 334 (79.7%) responses were negative. Among the positive statements, a number of comments about contentment with earnings were due to the availability of supplementary income (e.g. spouse, pension, other part-time work); others pointing to fortuitous

circumstances such as specific well-paying clients; good hourly rates of pay; and their ability to negotiate rates. Notably, three responses explicitly pointed to satisfaction with income on account of their enjoyment of the work itself being more important than what they earn.

Those with a neutral outlook on earnings tended to highlight factors such as career stage (i.e. not expecting high earnings early in their career); the contrast between earnings from direct clients and from LSPs; a personal choice not to pursue additional earnings, for reasons ranging from personality traits through to personal circumstances; and comments about translation being a supplement to other income. In a similar vein, others commented that, were their personal circumstances different, their income would not be sufficient to sustain themselves.

The bulk of negative comments centred around industry trends. Surprisingly, technology was only mentioned explicitly in a question on satisfaction with income five times, four responses of which were collocated with comments on market conditions and the other with a comment on LSP practices. Of the 71 negative responses to this question specifically, 33 (46.4%) cited the declining market and decreasing volumes; 15 (21.1%) called out LSPs' exploitative practices and downward price pressure; 14 (19.7%) argued that translation is underpaid and undervalued relative to the skills and qualifications required; five (7.0%) mentioned economic factors such as Brexit, the covid-19 pandemic, and the cost of living crisis in the UK; and three (4.2%) referred to lack of regulation of the translation profession.

### 5.1.2 Working Time Quality

Of the 272 responses coded under Working Time Quality, the majority were from questions about the positive and negative aspects of working conditions. With 202 (74.3%) positively-coded comments, the overall sentiment is that freelance translators in the UK are happy with Working Time Quality. The main reason cited was the degree of independence over working-time arrangements. As one of the respondents put it: "I am my own boss, so [I set] my own working times and I get to choose when to go on holiday". Conversely, though, we should also note that for most of the 70 negatively-coded responses, not having control over when or how they worked due to increasingly tight deadlines was cited as the primary issue by freelance translators.

### 5.1.3 Prospects

Overall, 451 responses were coded under Prospects: 47 (10.4%) positive, 87 (19.3%) neutral, and 317 (70.3%) negative. Responses focused mainly on the financial sustainability of the profession (158 responses), but also on positive and negative aspects of the profession and fulfilment (65

responses), satisfaction with career progression (59 responses), changes in working conditions (53 responses), and the closely related matter of satisfaction with income (40 responses).

On the positive side, some respondents reflected on developing business and marketing skills or capitalising on factors such as language pair, domain, or skill/expertise to mitigate concerns over future prospects. In terms of satisfaction with career progression, which is central to Prospects (Eurofound 2012, 21), 50.2% were broadly satisfied with career progression, 26.8% neutral, and 22.0% dissatisfied (n = 213). However, several respondents commented that there is either no progression in translation (or at least no steady upward trajectory) and that progression opportunities sometimes involve leaving the profession.

A key theme throughout was technology. For some, there was a sense of empowerment, either maintaining that humans will always be better than machines or arguing that technological developments could open up new opportunities. However, the majority of comments were negative, with many feeling that technological developments (especially AI) will limit future prospects. Other responses addressed changing market conditions, including prices relative to inflation, the lack of security, and links between the lack of prospects and the low perceived value of translation and translators.

Another important negative theme was the decline in working conditions, with 72.4% saying that conditions had deteriorated (n = 214). This sentiment was captured well in one response:

> 5 years ago, I would have said translation was a financially stable career. Since then, I have seen my workload plummet and other translators with a similar level of experience/charging similar rates tell me the same thing. I believe this is a direct consequence of neural MT and – with generative AI on the horizon – I don't think this is likely to improve any time soon.

Finally, we should note that there were no comments relating to Prospects in response to questions on working conditions. This is particularly telling in its absence. Indeed, such omissions could be read to indicate a severed link between working conditions and prospects, with current conditions perhaps not enabling career progression and destabilising translators' wider job security.

## 5.2 Intrinsic criteria

### 5.2.1 Skills and Discretion

Encouragingly, Skills and Discretion codes were more positive than for Earnings and Prospects, but still marginally negative. Of 174 responses coded under Skills and Discretion, 86 (49.4%) were negative, 78 (44.8%) positive, and 10 (5.8%) neutral. A series of negative comments pointed to

technology as the reason freelance translators are not always able to make full use of their skills. Many also stated that they had lost some discretion over the nature of their work ("[T]he rise of MT meaning people might have to say 'yes' to things they're not comfortable with, change their workflows to incorporate MTPE, that sort of thing"), or the timing of their work ("Expectations from LSPs that you are available 24/7 including during bank holidays"). Like Working Time Quality, this is a worrying trend, especially since our respondents ranked "being in control of my own work schedule" first and "having the ability to work on my own terms" fourth when asked to grade the importance of 10 professional priorities. Among the 16 responses to a question on positive aspects of working conditions coded under Skills and Discretion, ten focused on the variety and creativity of work. However, when asked to anticipate future changes in working conditions, all 18 responses pertaining to Skills and Discretion were negative. Most mentioned the fear of post-editing taking over, rendering work less enjoyable: "With MTPE […] satisfaction in doing the job is also at risk (loss of creativity and time to do a good job)."

### 5.2.2 Work Intensity

Sentiments towards Work Intensity were overwhelmingly negative. Of the 65 Work Intensity-coded items, 58 (89.3%) were negative and only 3 (4.6%) were positive. Many of these hinted at changing client (mostly LSP) expectations, leaving some respondents "feeling under pressure to work longer hours or to tight deadlines so as not to lose clients." As one respondent noted:

> Agencies are on a race to the bottom in treating and paying language specialists only to clean up messes after a machine has done its job. I don't know how translators will balance the need to keep pace with technology while not succumbing to pressure as a "word mill" that needs to, for income purposes, but never can, produce the same output as a machine.

This comment establishes a clear link between translation automation, increasing Work Intensity, and decreasing Skills and Discretion in their profession.

### 5.2.3 Social Environment

91 survey responses were coded under Social Environment. Of these, 63 (69.2%) were negative, 23 (25.3%) positive, and five (5.5%) neutral. Many of the negative statements reflected the fact that translators felt that clients (especially LSPs) saw them as "a number/resource". One respondent reported feeling "disregarded as a person and made to feel devalued/worthless as a professional of 20+ years experience". There is also an impact that comes from the general public. In the words of one respondent, translation is often portrayed by the general public and the media as mere

“photocopying between languages”, which makes some translators feel like “invisible cogs in the machine”. When asked about the public’s perception of translators, the most common impression was that translators are seen as “unimportant” (40.0%). Only 5.6% believed that the general public saw translators as either “important” or “very important” (n = 215). Another compounding factor, in the words of one respondent, is “the solitary/sedentary nature of my work” , which came up several times in relation to Social Environment in our survey. Looking at positively-coded comments, most pointed to professional associations and/or positive relationships with colleagues and clients as an important source of support, which in turn had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

### 5.2.4 Physical Environment

Physical Environment did not feature prominently in responses. When it did, it was almost exclusively in questions around working conditions. Of the 38 Physical Environment-related comments, 31 (81.6%) were negative and 7 (18.4%) were positive. Ergonomic concerns were the predominant negative reason. One respondent, for instance, mentioned having to work at the dining table. Another respondent mentioned having “physical issues (tendonitis in my elbows) due to working too intensively in order to meet deadlines”. In sharp contrast, positive statements evoked the freedom to choose one’s working environment, as well as one’s equipment.

# 6. Job quality for UK-based translators: still meaningful work?

Overall, the picture painted around job quality is a worrying one: the sentiment expressed by UK freelance translators is, on balance, negative towards all seven job quality criteria but one (Working Time Quality). Independence and control over working conditions are clearly aspects of job quality that UK freelance translators value considerably and still enjoy in their work. However, their sentiment towards the other two extrinsic job quality criteria (Earnings and Prospects) is overwhelmingly negative. Dissatisfaction with Earnings and Prospects seems to be a result of industry trends, and technology in particular. This conclusion corroborates Berg et al.’s (2023, 351-352) assertion that these two criteria are the criteria most likely to be affected by technological change. Even though technology can positively influence Earnings and Prospects (e.g. technology specialists can increasingly find gainful employment), in our case the perceived impact for freelance translation is clearly negative and can be linked to fear of worker displacement, gig-economy-style working conditions, and skills obsolescence.

The fact that so many UK freelance translators stay in the industry despite regarding their earnings as below average and having limited career prospects might suggest that, besides the working time quality afforded by the job, there are other, intrinsic pull factors motivating them to stay in the job. This argument would align with previous studies that have evidenced "translators' dissatisfaction with their working conditions (extrinsic factors) but satisfaction with the intrinsic factors (such as the task of translating)" (Sakamoto et al. 2024, 57). And yet, our data reveal mostly negative sentiments towards all four intrinsic criteria, albeit only marginally so. Indeed, a number of positive statements coded under Skills and Discretion mention the variety and creativity of translation work, factors undoubtedly contributing to many freelance translators still seeing their work as fulfilling or meaningful. Worryingly, though, many of the negative statements concerning Skills and Discretion again point to technology as a disruptor undermining enjoyment of work and freelance translators' ability to work on their own terms. The fear of being turned into post-editors looms large, and the negative role of technology features prominently across other intrinsic criteria. Automation has led to an intensification of work, with "a race to the bottom" in the industry leading to ever tighter deadlines. In fact, some of our respondents' feeling of being "a number/resource" recalls Moorkens' (2024, 487) observation that "there is a frustration and a diminution of agency when confronted with a faceless mathematised process as a basis for inscrutable decisions". Overall, our data seem to illustrate quite neatly Berg et al.'s observation (2023, 351-354) that digital technologies can risk replacing certain tasks that were formerly the domain of skilled workers, increase work time demands by squeezing deadlines, reduce the need for knowledge-sharing and interaction between colleagues, and give rise to new forms of ergonomic health concerns.

The negative picture described above is further corroborated by 'quantifying' the strength and polarity of sentiment for each of the job quality criteria (i.e. how frequently was each criterion mentioned and what was the average sentiment?). 2Given that participants were not explicitly asked about these criteria and we were, instead, reliant on participants responding to different open-text questions and evoking these job quality criteria in their responses, there was an element of 'self-selection' at play in the criteria and themes evoked (also bearing in mind the potential impact of social desirability bias). This meant that, for some criteria (e.g. Physical Environment), minimal data were collected, and therefore, both the frequency and the intensity of sentiment needed to be adjusted accordingly. Figure 2 visualises the strength of feeling for each of the job quality criteria. However, we must stress that these sentiment scores are based on our thematic coding and not respondents' own evaluation. By averaging the sentiment of each coded mention of the corresponding job quality criterion (-1 = negative, 0 = neutral, 1 = positive), and then weighting this average sentiment to account for the relative frequency of the codes (i.e. the average was multiplied by the proportion of responses coded under each criterion), Figure 2 highlights a strong negative

valence among respondents around Prospects and Earnings. Other criteria – Skills and Discretion, Physical Environment, Social Environment, Work Intensity – were negative in sentiment, but the strength of (negative) sentiment is somewhat assuaged by the relative infrequency with which they were evoked. While this does not eliminate these criteria as sources of dissatisfaction, it suggests that respondents were drawn more towards the positives of being a freelance worker (e.g. flexibility, reflected under Working Time Quality), offset by current and forward-looking challenges (namely, Prospects and Earnings).

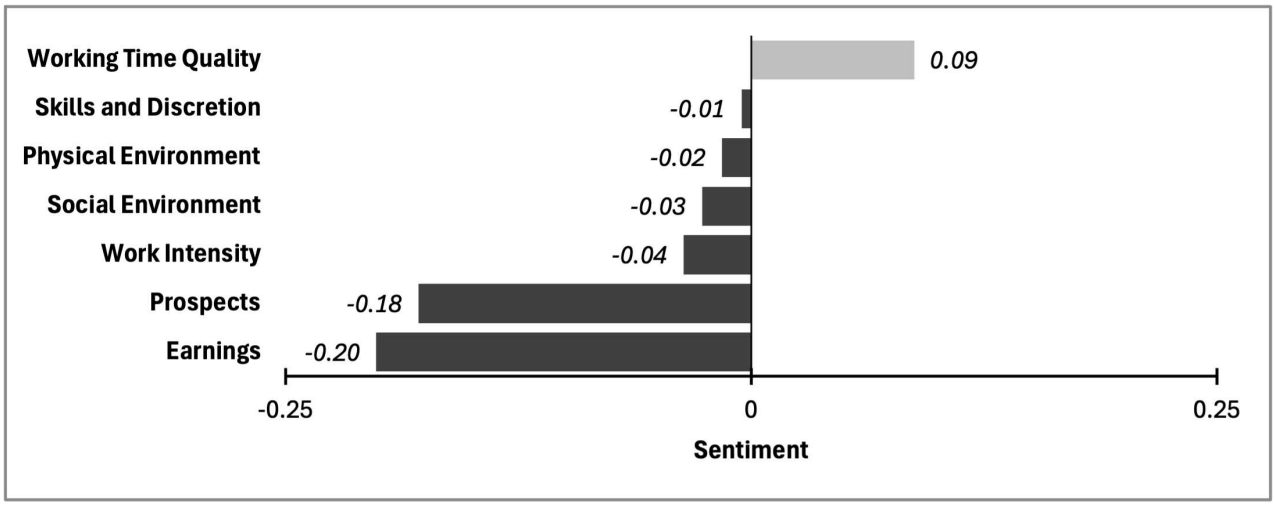


**Figure 32. Average sentiment for each job quality criterion, weighted by relative frequency of each criterion in coding data. Note that the full scale of this chart ranges from -1 (100% negative sentiment) to +1 (100% positive sentiment); the x-axis has been abridged here to show the bars more clearly.**

Figure 2 echoes charts produced by Eurofound which reflect five modelled job quality profiles ("High flying", "Smooth running", "Active manual", "Under pressure", "Poor quality"; see Eurofound 2017, 128). Although there is no Eurofound job quality chart that matches the shape of Figure 2 reflecting freelance translators, the closest chart that Eurofound offer is labelled the "Poor quality" profile. This profile is characterised by job security concerns, unsatisfactory career prospects, poor contractual arrangements, and low earnings (129). There are, however, two differences. Eurofound's "Poor quality" profile has negative scores across all criteria, while our findings reveal one positive score (Working Time Quality) and a small number of marginal cases (notably Skills and Discretion). These marginal cases still only make the picture in Figure 2 reflect a little more closely the somewhat unambitiously named "Under pressure" job quality profile devised by Eurofound.

The visualisation in Figure 2 also serves to highlight the broad trends at play in UK freelance translators' perspectives on job quality, especially given the self-selection at play in the collection of

the open-text data. The chartoffers a useful barometer of the issues that are of the greatest concern (or offer the greater satisfaction) when not constrained by specific questions. The negative picture above notwithstanding, our survey data bore out the paradoxical nature of underlying job quality and translators' sense of fulfilment. Indeed, when asked whether they found their freelance work fulfilling, 69.3% of our respondents reported finding their job very or somewhat fulfilling (n = 215). Along with this positive image of fulfilment, 52.8% of respondents reported being very or somewhat satisfied with working conditions, 18.2% were indifferent, and 29.0% were either very or somewhat dissatisfied (n = 214), which counters the narratives reflected in our qualitative coding. This further illustrates freelance translators' motivation-satisfaction paradox (Lambert and Walker 2024). In the words of one respondent: "It's a strange combination of very positive feelings about the work itself and quite negative feelings about the profession (in terms of its future, its ability to financially support me, etc.)".[5]

Given the number of negative technology-related sentiments in our data, it is important to interrogate the degree to which automation can be seen to challenge some, if not all, of the job quality criteria that make freelance translation work meaningful. According to Spencer (2024), even though automation has arguably "lessened drudgery and increased the scope for meaning in work", it has also left some workers "with hard and demeaning work to do". The main reason is that, in the present neoliberal age, "capitalist employers decide on technology without direct regard to the well-being of workers" (Spencer 2022, 272). Spencer's comments evoke Fırat et al.'s (2024) own findings about the lack of "decent work" for translators in Turkey, particularly for those engaged in the platform economy. Our data suggest that the foundational building blocks upon which UK-based freelance translators can see their work as meaningful are gradually being undermined. Despite Working Time Quality and Skills and Discretion being the two criteria seen more positively and less negatively, respectively, by our respondents, 85 respondents said they felt they had "little" (36.4%) or "no control" (3.2%) over their working conditions (n = 214). The reasons given by our respondents echo Carreira's (2024a, 397) observation that "freelance translators and similar language professionals working for LSPs have almost no market power to establish their working conditions". This assertion may explain why, when asked about the likelihood of recommending translation as a career, 48% of respondents (n = 215) said they were very (21.5%) or somewhat (26.5%) unlikely to do so. Conversely, only 26.5% said they would be somewhat (22%) or very (4.5%) likely to do so.

[5] Of course, once again, it is important to be mindful of the potential for selection bias and response bias when working with data and topics such as this. While our question design was intended to avoid any leading questions and to frame topics in a neutral manner, we cannot rule out the possibility of respondents overstating negative feelings.

# 7. Conclusion

“I would have recommended a translation career wholeheartedly up to about 5 years ago, but not anymore”, one of our respondents concluded. For them, “earning potential has decreased significantly, as has job satisfaction” and our findings echo this view. Our preliminary explorations, showing multiple recurring – but sometimes paradoxical – themes, suggest that recent developments may soon lead to a tipping point for UK freelance translators concerning job quality. For many, it is easy to see how what was formerly a love of their job may be turning into a labour of love. This labour of love was a key strand in our findings and combines a love for, and fulfilment from, the work itself with the alienating feeling of being a machine-like, replaceable worker as embedded in the concept of  labour.

While it is positive to see that most translators considered their work fulfilling, the overwhelmingly negative profiling of freelance translation’s job quality contrasts starkly with these positive sentiments and clearly illustrates the paradoxical nature of feelings translators express about their work. However, our data also highlight that the basis for meaningful work, i.e. underlying job quality, is being seriously eroded. Such a shift is closely tied to on-going automation and technological disruption, in turn affecting industry practices and the wider perceived social value of translation. Echoing the quotation that opens this conclusion, many of the translators suggested that underlying conditions were becoming such that either the positive ‘pulls’ of the work no longer counteract these negative effects or that they can no longer make a good living and are forced out of the profession. While our respondents addressed positive aspects such as the agency, pride, and satisfaction that they feel in aspects of their work, as well as the positive impact of relationships and professional communities, others tackled the negative role of current industry business models.

We must therefore wonder to what extent the positive pulls have in fact played a damaging role in “masking” fundamental, underlying issues (echoing Zwischenberger and Alfer 2022, 212) that are now prompting some to question their place in the profession. Ultimately, if such departures multiply more widely, this will pose a significant threat to the long-term sustainability of the industry, and there is a dire need for empirical research on numbers leaving the profession and their reasons for doing so.

Another powerful strand also worthy of future exploration lies in situating freelance translation in the wider context of, for instance, job quality among the self-employed more generally. In this vein, Eurofound’s report on job quality and developments in social protection among self-employed workers in the EU suggests that several of our themes are not unique to translation. They explain

that “[s]ome self-employment is characterised by low and intermittent incomes and high financial insecurity, often combined with poor working conditions and prospects”, and comment on the blurred boundaries between employment types, particularly for workers “who depend on one or a limited number of clients and whose autonomy and ability to set prices is restricted” (2024, 2), exacerbated by the growth in platform work. In their “policy pointers”, Eurofound highlight the importance of safety nets built upon a “strong and sustainable system (partly) based on contributions that recognises the specific nature of self-employment” to “cushion the risks associated with self-employment”, and call for the criteria determining employment status to be clarified (ibid.). There are clear parallels with the needs of the translation industry in these insights and collaboration on a wider level could lead to greater collective agency to challenge current developments.

Challengingly, in his exploration of “bad business practices” in the translation industry, Carreira (2024b, 16-17) concludes with an appeal to translators to use the agency that they do have, and also calls for translator trainers to teach business skills. We can see the value of such *pedagogical* approaches, especially when combined with developing trainee translators’ awareness of the “activism programs” he mentions (ibid.). However, we must agree with Jalalian Daghigh and Shuttleworth (2024, 17-18) that focusing on individual responsibility in such a way risks further entrenching the neoliberal practices that have already “indelibly marked [the translation] profession” with “deteriorating working conditions, intensified competition, diminished compensation, and pervasive job insecurity”. The fact that many professionals already have limited agency and are barely making ends meet may explain why Carreira later argued for “informed policy-making based on collective action by the community of language professionals” (2024c, 194). Equally, while there is an urgent need to address emerging developments in training contexts, aspiring translators risk having even less agency or will to change industry practices, particularly as the *status quo* becomes further established. There is a shared responsibility for experienced translators with a platform, associations, translation trainers, academics, and perhaps even governments to collectivise, to discuss these concerns, and to push back.

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