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Should talented officers 'skip' ranks to progress faster in the service?:

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

## UK forces assessing translation technology

TWO UK police forces are looking at the possibility of testing a new translation software with a view to substantially reducing the need for interpreter services which cost millions of pounds every year.

There are no national figures which show how much police forces in England and Wales spend on interpreters.

Figures released by the Home Office show that the UK Border Agency spent more than £7 million on interpreting services in 2008. The Metropolitan Police spent £9.9 million on interpreting and translation costs in the same year.

The hourly rate for interpreters in London paid by the force in 2008 was £51 which went up to more than £68 if they are called out on Sundays and Bank Holidays.

Many police forces use interpreting agencies for this work, but this can be an expensive way to deal with straightforward inquiries. For example, an interpreter might be called in by a force only to discover the person only wanted to ask directions or something non-essential.

CommSOFT Ltd, a UK software company, has launched a technology that it claims can reduce the costs of interpreter services by 80 per cent. Called *Language Assistant*, the software sits between two people who cannot speak a common language and enables communication between them at any location, such as police-station front desks, custody suites or kiosks at mobile units or outdoor events. The system automates handling both urgent and non-urgent demand for police services, dramatically reducing police workload.

By identifying and understanding which languages people speak, the system can facilitate conversations – from simple tasks such as finding out what someone wants to reporting crimes, arresting a suspect, managing people in a custody suite or returning an impounded vehicle. The system understands any required processes and delivers these in any language (including English) automatically. It can also give directions and advice.

Neil Coulson, the company's CEO, told PPR that two police forces are looking at the system to see if it could work for them.

'We're getting into the detail of exactly how they would like to deploy the product,' he said. 'A lot of the focus is on automating existing communication events and processes, such as at police-station front desks and in custody suites with additional interest in integrating with force web-sites and delivery via mobile devices.'

'There is a focus is on the communication automation aspect of the software – using it to automatically handle English speakers, not just non-English speakers. Handling non-urgent demand, such as people who want directions, is as expensive as handling urgent demand, and the forces we are talking to realise this.'

He says the new software does not use computer-generated translations, which he says are notoriously inaccurate. 'Translations done by computer cannot be relied upon and still result in embarrassing examples such as referring to a benefit claimant as a 'beggar' or translating 'Does your wife work?' as 'Does your wife function?'. The opportunity to confuse or cause offence is huge. It uses real, certified translations by native speakers and then uses those translations repeatedly whenever they are required, removing the need to use an interpreter every time – which is what creates the huge public-sector bill'.

The system can operate between people sitting at a desk or even where the people are separated by a physical barrier such as when an officer is in a police station and the other person is outside the building using a kiosk or telephone, or at a mobile police station at an outdoor event.

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