

Meet Vic – Interview with a Speech Captioner.

Tell us, Vic, what exactly is a Speech Captioner?

At Ai-Media, a speech captioner uses voice recognition technology to create live closed captioning for deaf and hearing impaired people. Closed captioning relays audio information in text form. So, for a speech captioner, this means that the audio material (TV show, classroom, live event) is repeated – or ‘re-spoken’ – and the text is created by the captioner’s specially trained speech recognition program.

How did you become a Speech Captioner?

I started captioning about 3 years ago. A good friend of mine recommended it to me as she knew I shared her passion for language.

What skills are needed?

English needs to be your first language, as you need to have a good understanding of English grammar, spelling and punctuation. Listening skills are also important, as captioners are the ears of the deaf or hearing impaired viewer. Captioning also involves a few different software applications, so it helps to be comfortable and confident using a PC.

What training and qualifications are necessary to get the job?

There aren't any specific qualifications needed to get a job as a speech captioner, although a university degree is definitely helpful. Having some experience as a captioner, transcriptionist, teacher (for school captioning) or interpreter would definitely be of some advantage, or if you have worked with the deaf and hearing impaired community before.

Personally, I did a BA at USYD, majoring in Art History and Spanish. I have always had a real passion for languages and I think that that really helps me as a captioner.

Describe what a speech captioner might do in a typical day?

I'll give you an example for a speech captioner who would be doing classroom captioning. They would have been allocated a few classes for that day, so they would check out their timetable first. Then they would log in to the Ai-Live system and start up their speech recognition profile. They would probably warm up for a few minutes

before the lesson started and then dial the phone number allocated for that lesson, say Year 10 English. They would then listen to the class and produce the captions by 'respeaking' what they hear into their speech recognition program. When the class wraps up, they would log out, end the phone call, and fill out a quick shift reporting online form.

What do you like most about the job?

I've always been one of those people who is interested - and a little bit pedantic - about English grammar and punctuation. Working from home is a fantastic bonus. I also really love the idea that my work is bringing access to people who have been struggling without it for so long.

What do you like least?

Captioning maths classes - that was never my favourite subject!

Do you have flexible working hours?

Yes, the hours are quite flexible. One of the great things about being a speech captioner is that you can complete your work and then you're able to log off leave it all behind. And you might have even learned something!

Speech captioning best suits people who work part-time, are studying, or have family commitments as the work is in school hours and is on a casual contractor basis.

What is your working environment like?

It's pretty comfortable - I don't have a 'home office' or anything but I have my captioning desk set up at home with my laptop and everything I need. Not having to commute to work saves me so much time.

Besides schools, what other industries need speech captioners?

We have provided live captioning for TV and conferences, as well as meetings. I hope that as the technology keeps getting better, captioning becomes more applicable to people's daily lives.

The Internet is also in desperate need of more captioning.

Do you need any special equipment for the job?

Speech captioning is something that can be done from the comfort of your own home, but you need a few pieces of equipment before you can start. The basic stuff is a PC or laptop, Internet connection and a phone line. Speech captioners then need their own headsets, microphones and software.

What are the reactions of the deaf and hearing impaired students to your work?

The students have shown a great deal of interest in the captioning. So far, they're all around 15, 16, 17, so they have really embraced the technology and are interested in how it all works. As this is their education, they expect – and should get – a very high level of accuracy and grammar in their captions. This is something I believe is core in providing equal access for these students.