



ATTORNEY SPOTLIGHT SERIES:

Translating the Law with Attorney Lisa L. Cowan

It's not uncommon for folks outside the legal profession to treat legalese as a foreign language. But for many of Lisa Cowan's clients, it's both the figurative and literal truth.

Cowan is an attorney with **Brereton Law Office**, a boutique litigation firm in Santa Cruz, California. The firm's location means that many of its clients claim Spanish as their native language—with many speaking Spanish exclusively, which makes Cowan an invaluable asset to her firm.

That's because Cowan is multilingual, fluent in several languages, including French, Italian and, perhaps most importantly, Spanish. "We definitely have a lot of Spanish speaking clients," she says. And her ability to converse clearly with those clients is obviously very important.

HER PATH TO THE PRACTICE

Born and raised in Scotland, Cowan earned a master's degree in interpreting and translating. It was through that career path that she discovered a passion for the legal profession. "I got too interested in the legal documents I was translating, so I decided to switch fields," Cowan jokes.

She received her law degree from the University of Edinburgh, and then moved to the United States, where she passed the California bar and earned another master's degree in intellectual property, science and technology.

Cowan now focuses on civil litigation—more on that in a sec.

TRANSLATING THE LAW

Given how difficult reading legal text can be to a layperson already, it's even more cumbersome to those who aren't comfortable with the language it's written in. As alluded to above, Cowan's clients often exclusively speak Spanish, so her extensive experience as a translator helps her illuminate the subtle nuances of the law related to their case.

That's perhaps doubly important for these clients, whom may find it difficult to find legal help to begin with. "The monolingual Spanish speaking community is really underrepresented," Cowan explains. She, along with two other firm employees, are fluent in Spanish, and she acknowledges how being able to converse with clients in their natural language can encourage them to bring forward their legal issues.

A PASSION FOR CIVIL LITIGATION

Cowan explains that she focuses on civil litigation because she really enjoys both the subject matter and client interactions.

In her words, this particular area of practice is dynamic, and she's always excited to learn about the diverse legal issues her clients bring her. "It's the variety that makes this area so gripping for me," Cowan states.

But that's not to say that her work isn't without its share of challenges. "Because general litigation touches on all these different areas of law, it's a mammoth problem-solving exercise to litigate a case," Cowan states.

And if that complex process wasn't enough, she explains "the law's changing all the time, so we've got to stay abreast of what's new."

Combined with potentially limited client resources, Cowan describes how litigating a case can be a huge juggling act—all reinforcing the importance of communicating clearly with clients through a common language.

And for Cowan, being able to better advocate for her clients is what really energizes her work.

"The reason I love my job so much is that, they're real people, with human stories," Cowan explains. "You're able to step in and help solve their problems."

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