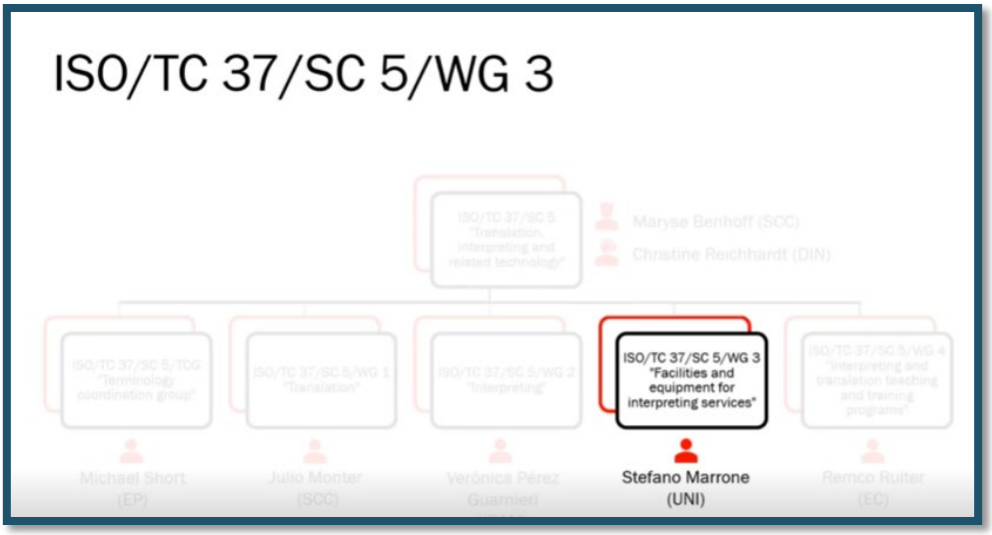
ISO 17651 Series: Modernising the Working Environment for Interpreters

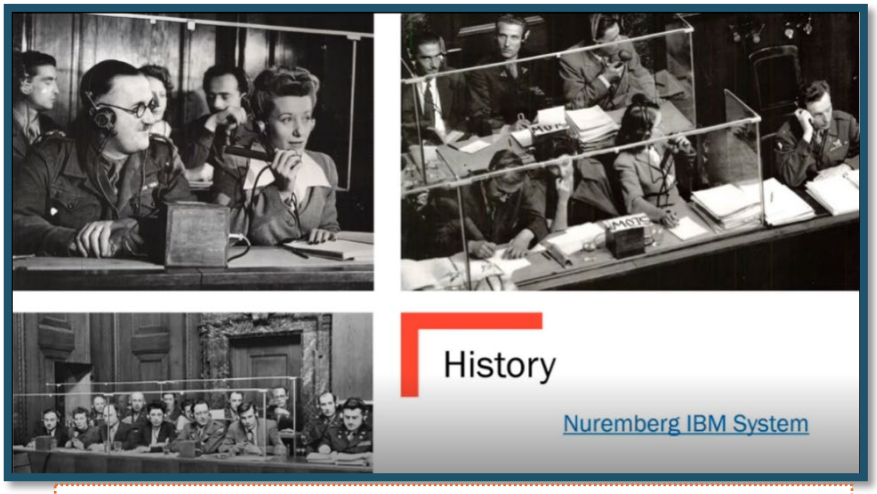
By Carina Balbo, ATC ISO Committee

The EUATC hosted its second series of ISO webinars in November 2024, during which Project Leader Frédéric Pirotte presented an insightful overview of the **ISO 17651 series – Parts 1 to 3 –** focusing on the working environment for simultaneous interpreters. Under the umbrella of ISO/TC 37/SC 5, which includes both translation and interpreting matters, Working Group 3 is dedicated to facilities and equipment for interpreting services.



Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric

A Brief Historical Overview

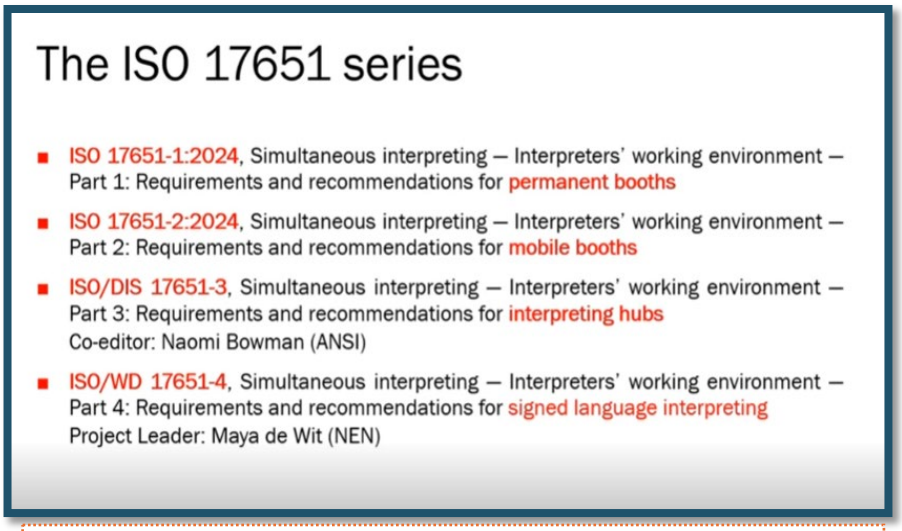


Nuremberg IBM System. *Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte*

Simultaneous interpreting first gained prominence during the Nuremberg trials of 1946–47. Since then, discussions on ISO standards for the technical working environment of interpreters have evolved considerably. The initial standard, referenced as 2603, was published in 1974, followed by a standard addressing mobile booths in 1981—with subsequent updates in 1983 and 1998. After a period of dormancy in the acoustics

field, efforts to enhance these standards were revitalised in December 2013. The establishment of Working Group 3 within Technical Committee 37, Subcommittee 5, has since led to the development of new standards, including the fourth edition of 2603 and the third edition of 4043.

The new ISO 17651 series comprises four distinct standards. In January 2024, two standards relating to permanent and mobile booths were published. A third part, currently at the draft international standard stage, is dedicated to interpreting hubs and is co-edited by Naomi Bowman from ANSI (United States). The fourth part, which focuses on sign language interpreting, has recently been launched and is led by Maya de Wit from the Netherlands.



Overview of the ISO 17651 series. *Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte*

The Need for New Standards

The impetus behind the development of new standards for the technical working environment of interpreters is twofold. First, the rapid pace of technological advancement necessitates an update of the requirements originally established in 2016, ensuring they are expressed in a more technology-neutral language. Second, the post-pandemic era has underscored the importance of innovating approaches to issues such as mobile booth ventilation.

Furthermore, the decision to create an entirely new series arose after a request to the national standardisation body to review standards 2603 and 4043 was declined. By consolidating all relevant standards into a single series – with a unified project leadership – a comprehensive and consistent framework is established for all interpreter working environments, including emerging setups such as interpreting hubs.

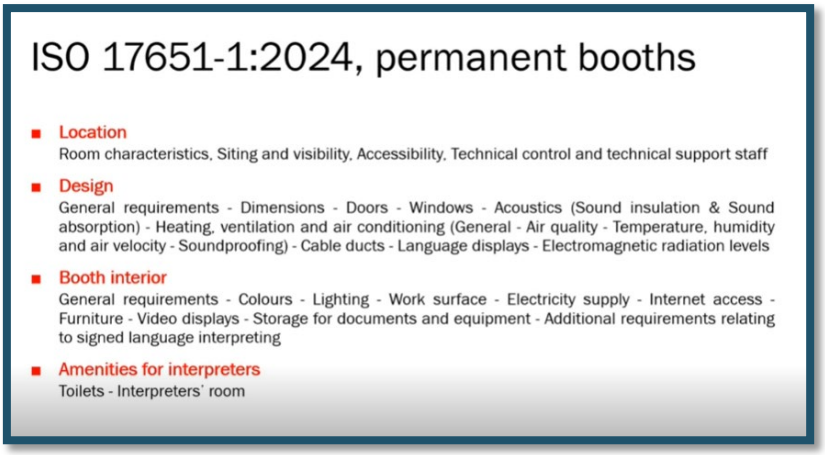
A Closer Look at the ISO 17651 Standards

ISO 17651 Part One: Permanent Booths

ISO 17651 Part One specifies the requirements for permanent booths used in simultaneous interpreting. These specialized enclosures, typically situated adjacent to meeting or conference rooms, are designed to provide interpreters with an optimal working environment. The standard covers numerous aspects, including the work environment itself, visual communication between interpreters, participants and technical staff, and crucially, sound insulation between the booth, the room, and the external environment.

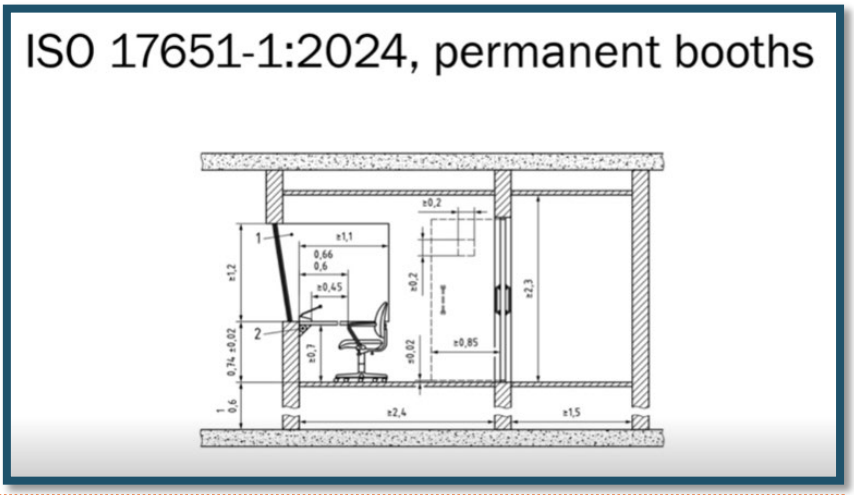
Key elements of the standard include:

- **Design and Layout:** Guidance on the positioning and dimensions of booths to accommodate three, four, or five interpreters.
- **Technical Requirements:** Specifications for doors, windows, sound insulation, and ventilation systems.
- **Interior Features:** Details on interior finishes, including colour, lighting, and work surface dimensions, as well as requirements for electrical supply and amenities.



ISO 17651-1:2024, technical requirements. *Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte*

Diagrams included in the standard offer detailed instructions for architects and building companies, highlighting the importance of meeting established dimensions to ensure the booth is fit for purpose. The booth must be elevated from the floor to ensure interpreters have a clear view over the heads of individuals in front of the booth.



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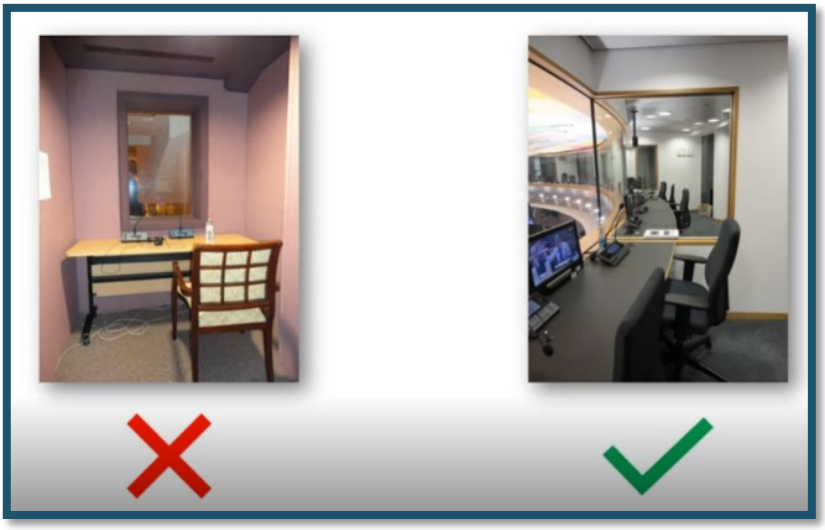
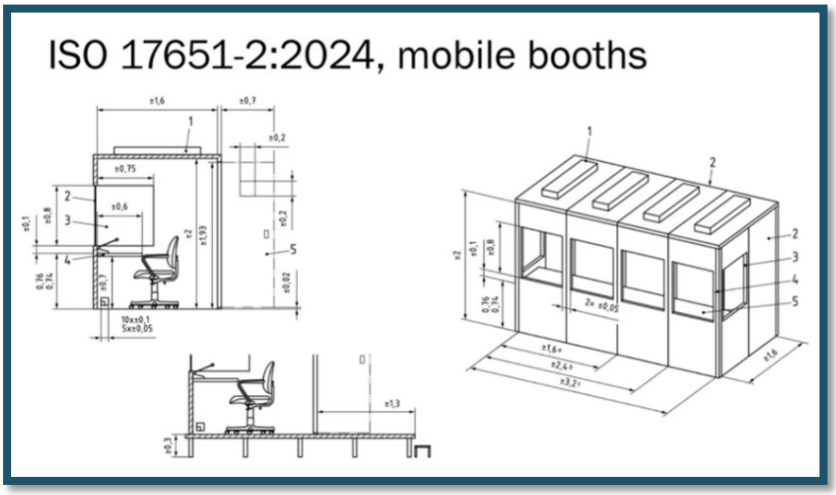


Left: Non-compliant booth. Right: Fully compliant booths. *Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte*

ISO 17651 Part Two: Mobile Booths

ISO 17651 Part Two addresses mobile booths, which are designed for temporary use at various locations. Unlike permanent booths, mobile booths are dismantlable, transportable, and intended for shorter durations, making them particularly useful for events requiring a temporary setup. While they share many similarities with permanent booths, mobile booths have specific requirements regarding handling, transport, storage, and ventilation systems.

Manufacturers and stakeholders are provided with comprehensive dimensions and installation instructions to ensure that mobile booths deliver effective sound insulation and meet the operational demands of simultaneous interpreting in diverse venues.



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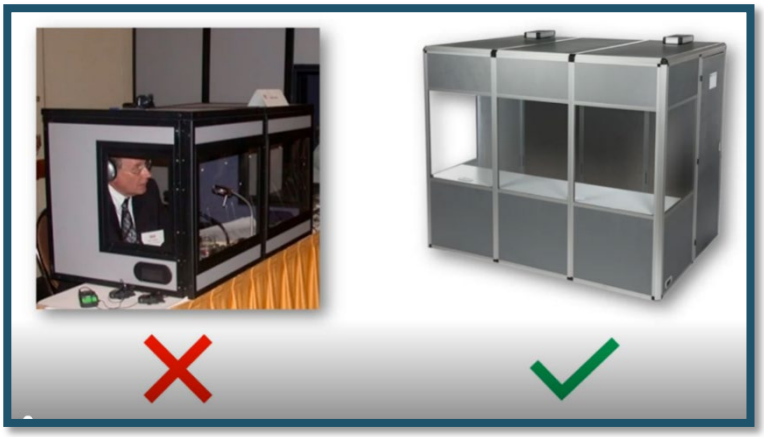


Left: Non-compliant table hood (insufficient in size and inadequate insulation).
Right: Fully compliant booths.
Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte

ISO 17651 Part Three: Interpreting Hubs

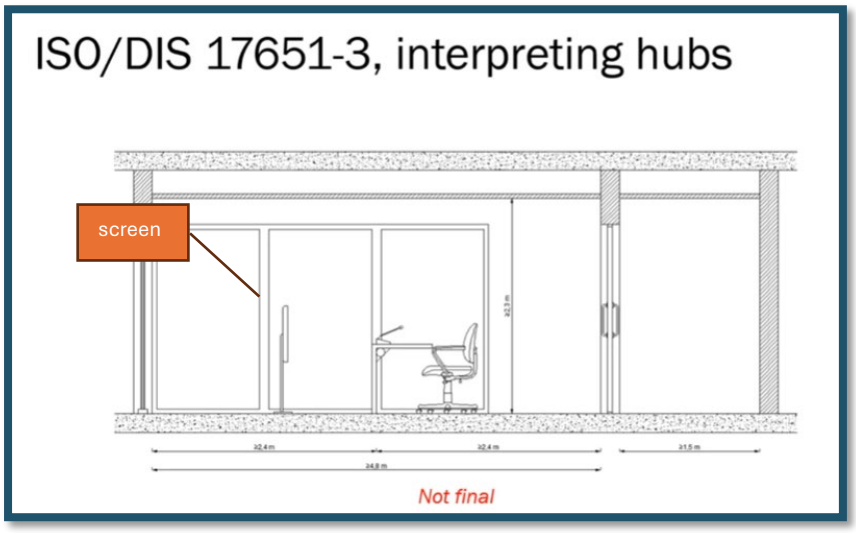
With the evolution of the interpreting landscape, ISO 17651 Part Three aims to standardise the new concept of the interpreting hub. Led by Frédéric Pirotte, this draft standard addresses the unique workplace requirements of interpreting hubs, which differ from traditional booths by virtue of their lack of direct visual access to the communicative event.

The standard outlines:

- **IT Infrastructure:** Requirements to ensure seamless connectivity with the meeting room.
- **Interpreting Equipment:** Specifications for audio-visual systems and display units.

- **Technical Support:** The role of on-site technical control and support staff in facilitating remote and simultaneous interpretation.

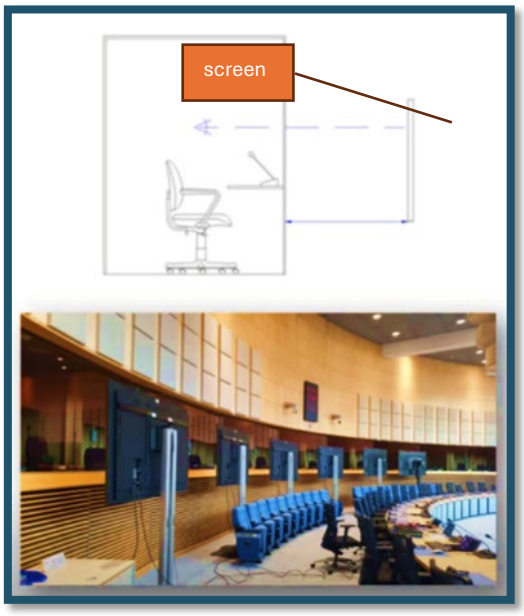
The design for permanent interpreting hubs includes configurations that accommodate necessary screens and other equipment, ensuring interpreters are well-equipped despite the absence of a direct view of the event.



Preliminary design. *Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte*

There are no standards for assessing compliance due to the lack of examples. This picture shows a meeting room with screens installed in front of the booth for remote interpretation during a college seminar by the Commissioners.

Source: EUATC ISO/TC37/SC 5 webinar presentation 24 November 2024 by Frédéric Pirotte



Embracing the Future of Interpreting Environments

The introduction of the ISO 17651 series represents a significant step forward in modernising the working environment for interpreters. By standardising permanent booths, mobile booths, and emerging interpreting hubs, these standards aim to enhance sound quality, comfort, and technical reliability, ensuring that interpreters can perform to the highest standard in any setting.

Let's build a stronger, more standardised industry together!

Read more about ISO standards development for language services at
https://atccertification.com/about-iso-standards/