

What type of translation agency staff is right for you?

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When you have materials that need to be translated into a foreign language, how do you decide where to send them? Your basic choice is between an agency that uses only freelance translators or one that has employee translators in-house. Your decision on which to use should depend on the type of final product you are looking for and the subject matter of the material to be translated.

This article describes the two types of agencies in more detail, to help you make an informed decision regarding the type of agency that will work best for you. We have tried to maintain an impartial view of both types while making potential clients aware of the industry and its various practices and levels of quality.

Agency staffing decisions

Agencies that use only freelance translators may do so for the following reasons:

- ◆ Freelance translators can be found who specialize in languages and subjects that may not be available through an in-house staff, which enables the agency to provide a wider range of expert services.
- ◆ The agency can draw on a broad base of freelancers to assign more than one translator, or a team, to expedite rush or high-volume work.
- ◆ Instead of waiting for the in-house translator(s) in a particular language or subject area to become available, the agency can always find someone who is qualified and available immediately to work on a project, thus maintaining a smooth flow of projects and helping to reduce turnaround times.

Agencies that employ in-house translators may do so for the following reasons:

- ◆ They received a large contract and it was more cost-effective to hire someone full-time, or they specialize in a particular language or group of languages: Asian or Arabic, for example. Agencies in this situation might employ in-house people for these particular large accounts while using freelancers for smaller jobs.
- ◆ They specialize in a particular field, and can keep a translator working full-time in that field of expertise.
- ◆ They have made a simple business decision to cut costs, offer cheaper rates, or increase their profit margin, without giving high priority to quality. It is also easier to run projects when all translators are in one place and don't have to be contacted for each job.
- ◆ They employed a highly skilled translation staff to handle a high volume of work in a particular language or subject area, and are trying to keep that staff occupied during a time of reduced volume in their field(s) of expertise.

Which is best for you?

If you have an occasional need for translation in a common language or subject area, either type of agency will be satisfactory. If you require translation in a specific field, such as medicine, and find an agency with in-house translators who specialize in medicine, you could choose either that agency or one that uses freelance translators. However, you wouldn't want to select an agency that uses in-house translators who do not specialize in the medical field.

If you only require translation into one language, you may want to select an agency that specializes in just that language. These "niche" agencies are formed when several translators start working together and help each other translate, edit, and proofread work. Many can offer cheaper rates than a full-service agency, but they may not be able to work in some software packages or have similar limitations. In addition, if your translation needs change in the future, you will find yourself having to search for another agency.

If you are using such a specialized agency and you begin to require translation into other languages, you have two alternatives: find other language-specific agencies, in which case you become a "project manager," working with multiple suppliers; or, find another agency that handles all languages and entrust your projects to them. If you are happy with your original specialized agency, you can keep that language's work with them and give all other languages to another agency. In this case, however, be sure that the agencies can work effectively with each other, since communication is important to keep translations consistent between languages.

If your translation requirements involve specific technical fields, high volumes, or uncommon languages, your best choice is probably an agency that works with freelancers. Such an agency can draw upon a much broader range of languages and expertise, and its project managers will be skilled in coordinating multiple languages and documents to ensure translation consistency across all languages and materials.

How do the translators decide?

Translation, like any other field, includes professionals with a wide range of skill and talent, and those at the top end of the ability scale can command the going rate or better. A translator can earn 25% to 100% more as a freelancer than as an in-house employee, even while working fewer hours. The average yearly salary for an in-house agency translator is around \$30,000. If employed in-house by a major corporation, it may be \$45,000. That same translator could make as much as \$100,000 as a full-time freelancer. For example, a translator worked 40-hour weeks as an in-house agency employee. Now, as a freelancer, she works 20 to 25 hours per week and her income has increased 30%.

So why would a translator choose to work in-house for less money? Many translators begin their careers working as agency employees, to gain experience and make contacts in the field. Others work in-house because they have no formal training or certification to verify their abilities, however skilled they may be, and so must gain the credentials before they can get freelance work from most agencies. Some decide not to freelance full-time because they are unwilling or unable to market themselves, search for work, and run their own business.

Many in-house translators move on to become self-employed after working several years in an agency, once they have become more experienced and gained confidence and contacts in the industry. They may be tired of the inflexible working hours, or they may disagree with certain business practices: most agency or corporate employees are not given the option of refusing work that is outside their specific range of expertise, so they may feel that the quality of their product is being jeopardized by their employer. Freelance translators, on the other hand, can decide what topics they will or will not accept, what hours they keep, and how busy they want to be.

Many other freelance translators start that way from the beginning. They may have a degree in translation and a background in computers or some other industry. They may have had to pass strict translator testing in their home countries, or might be certified by the American Translators Association in the United States. If their writing skills, technical knowledge, and self-marketing abilities are sufficient, they will enjoy a successful career with monetary and many other advantages.

Quality vs. profit

Although a specialized agency can provide excellent service in its area of focus using a full-time in-house staff, you may wonder why an agency offering translation of all languages and subjects would employ in-house translators, since a much wider range of languages and expertise is available through the use of freelancers. It is a purely financial decision without consideration of quality, because in-house employees simply cost the company less money.

Obviously, an agency using both in-house and freelance translators would keep its own employees busy before sending work out to others. They might give them all types of subject matter, and in some cases have them work beyond the limits of their ability, such as having someone who speaks South American Spanish translate for Mexico or Spain. They may also have non-native speakers working on translations.

The most common languages that a mixed agency would have in-house would be the “FIGS”: French, Italian, German and Spanish. They may tell their clients that they use freelance people in addition to the in-house staff, or that their in-house translators are only used to edit work done by freelancers. They might also tell clients that they can turn work around faster this way. Managed correctly, this system can work, but those of us in the industry can confirm that this is often not the case. Many take this approach for purely financial reasons, and that will always factor into how the project is managed. When profit alone is the bottom line, a manager would rather hire someone for \$28,000 annually than pay out \$80,000 to freelance translators. However, they will get the service and quality that they pay for. Although they may hire excellent in-house translators, mixed agencies often ask too much of them, and employees usually do not have the option of turning down jobs that are not comfortably within their range of abilities.

Making your final decision

As you can see, in some cases agencies using in-house translators may be saving considerable amounts of money. Based on the translator incomes we described above, you would expect the rates of agencies with employee translators to be half those of agencies that use only freelancers. However, since money is often the primary concern of such agencies, they may be passing only a small fraction of their savings on to their clients. You might find them to be consistently lower on quotations than other agencies that use freelance translators, but usually not by a significant amount. Clients may opt to use them because they are cheaper, but since the cost difference is often slight, is it worth the possible sacrifice in quality?

Some agencies' rates may appear to be much lower than the average, and in that case, you need to check on the services offered and the translators they are using. You may have found a gem, but you need to be sure. Before using any agency, ask for references and contact them. Inquire about the type and quality of work the agency did, how long they have worked with the reference source, whether they deliver work on time, solve problems competently, and stand behind their product.

Whichever type of agency you choose, insist on product quality as your top concern. A small amount saved on the original translation will not compensate for the sales lost if your brochure describes your product incorrectly, awkwardly, or with cultural insensitivity. As in all facets of the business world, the

supplier who is chosen because he consistently delivers a high-quality product is often not the lowest bidder.

***About the author:** Charlene Nagy is president of NCS Enterprises, a full-service translation agency started in 1992 with offices in Pittsburgh, PA. Charlene has worked in the translation field since 1988 and also gained valuable agency experience abroad in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.*