

## Benchmarking translation agencies

Contributed to the International Technical Communication SIG STC Translation Kit by Jill Finan, Senior Member, Rochester Chapter STC

Whether you are new at the translation business or a veteran of many globalization projects, a benchmarking study of your translation supplier(s) is a worthwhile endeavor. In benchmarking, you compare suppliers against one another based on specific criteria. The suppliers' performance in the study can reassure you that your current relationship is a good one, or can lead to you a more compatible agency.

Begin by deciding the criteria that are most important to your company. Here are some questions that you might want to ask as you get started:

**Can the agency handle the amount of work and type of work you require?** To determine whether the agency's capacity matches your needs, look at the number of words per day their linguists can translate, and the number of pages per day their layout artists can format. Also look at the number and type of languages they can handle. Consider language capabilities not only based on your current needs, but those you anticipate. You may not be selling in Asia today, but you may need Japanese and Chinese translations next week.

**Does the agency have quality standards and measures in place?** ISO certification is a sure indication that quality is a major consideration of the agency. Your corporation may require additional certification. Look for affiliations with professional organizations such as the American Translators Association or STC. Ask to see the company's quality manual and standard operating procedures. Ask whether the company has formal processes for qualifying linguists.

**Are the agency's prices competitive with comparable suppliers?** This question can be tricky because translation agencies charge in different ways. Most charge on a different scale for different languages. Some charge for desktop publishing work by the page, some charge by the hour. Ask for the average price per word for translations and the average price per page for desktop publishing. Be sure to ask what the agency charges for incorporating reviewer corrections into translated material; this can be a hidden cost that you don't know about until after the work is finished. Find out how much the agency charges for project management time, for building translation glossaries, and for using translation memory tools. Also ask whether the agency offers discounts based on volume work or long-term partnerships.

Other issues worth considering are:

**Location.** A several-hour difference in time zones may not seem significant until you have a rush job to be completed one morning, and your translators don't come into work until afternoon, your time. If your translation work is complex and requires hands-on familiarity with your product, you may want to work with a local agency.

**Company stability.** Look at the number of years the company has been in business and the experience of its leaders and project managers. Try to examine a business analysis for the company (such as a Dun & Bradstreet report); such reports offer good clues as to the way the company does business.

**Subject area expertise.** Ask whether the agency has a focus or expertise in your particular subject area. For example, if you're translating financial software and documentation, ask whether the agency has linguists with financial expertise. The result will be translations of better quality and usability.

**Tools.** If the agency uses software tools to create translation glossaries or memories, find out whether the tools are widely-available, industry-standard ones or whether they are proprietary. Also find out whether the agency has (or is willing to get) the tools required to work with your documentation, software, and illustration files.

Once you decide on the issues most important to you, create a Request for Information (RFI). The RFI contains the questions you want to ask the agencies, designed to help you analyze results in an unbiased way. Send the RFI to your current translation agency plus three to six other agencies. Be sure to provide a contact name in case the recipient has questions. Provide a deadline date for receiving responses.

When you receive the responses, take plenty of time to analyze them. It's helpful to create a spreadsheet so you can compare responses side-by-side. Answers may be provided in wide ranges (for example, in my own benchmarking study, the answer to "How many pages per day can a desktop publishing specialist format?" ranged from "15 minimum" to "30-150." In such cases, average the answers to make them as comparable as possible. Then, step back and compare. Some responses may immediately leap off the page as extremely high or extremely low; you may need to follow up to make sure these outliers are valid. Try coloring the cells in your spreadsheet red, yellow, or green to indicate clear winners, losers, or marginally acceptable agencies in each category.

Once your benchmarking study is complete, compile all the material in a binder (including your RFI, copies of the responses from each agency, and your spreadsheet) and show it to your management. With luck, your current vendor is a winner in all categories. If your current agency is a loser in more than one category, it's worthwhile to investigate and find out if a new agency can better suit your requirements. In any case, the documented evidence will be helpful to you as you plan both your current and future translation work.

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