

Translation Management: In-house or Outsourced

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The suggestions that follow are culled from 10 years of experimentation and note-taking by a client in the translation game. I have tried to arrange them in logical groupings, but real coherence is difficult to achieve when it involves such a compilation. Although the company I work for has found it advantageous to move away from dependence on translation agencies, complete hands-on management of translation projects is not for the neophyte. Easing into it one language at a time, however, may be attempted after becoming intimately familiar with the basic translation process.

GENERAL (and some cost elements)

- Those involved in managing translation projects will benefit from membership in the American Translators Association, as well as from membership in STC and its International Technical Communication Special Interest Group.
- Specify that estimates and price quotes – agencies’ and freelancers’ – be given in U.S. dollars even if billing or payment may be in a different currency, for ease of comparison of competing quotes. Looking at the overall job cost can help avoid trying to compare different pricing methods, such as cents per word from one vendor, dollars-and-cents per line from another, dollars per page (specifying, of course, what constitutes a page) and other structuring. It is helpful to have quotes broken down into such components as translation, linguistic editing, desk top publishing(DTP)/typesetting, proofreading, and project management fees. Be wary of high DTP costs if they are combined with very low translation costs: multilingual DTP is sometimes overpriced, and the economies possible through operational efficiency in formatting the same document in several languages may not be passed on to the client.
- Obtain each vendor’s dollars-per-hour “consulting rate,” for such tasks as developing or refining a glossary, editing and proofreading, reviewing an old document for comparison with a new version, and any other task logically billed by the hour.
- Ask how the translator or agency prices the occasional word or sentence that comes up as a last-minute change. For a translation job costing hundreds or thousands of dollars, I expect to receive such “little somethings” gratis, at a minimal cost or at least never incurring a one-hour minimum. This is easy when working directly with a translator with whom I have established a relationship, but may be expensive through an agency.
- Minimize requests for rush jobs so you can ask for real speed when you truly have a rush situation – and offer to pay rush charges if warranted.
- A turnaround component – Offer to pay for content reviews, so you can reasonably expect prompt attention when you send a document overseas for a technical review by a subsidiary of your company, or a distributor’s designated staff person. Have linguistic reviews done before content, so SMEs (subject matter experts, whose language skills are unknown) will not need to proofread, and not be tempted to edit.

SOURCE TEXT IS KEY TO SUCCESS

- Consider translation needs from the outset! Write source English text with translation in mind (see American Translators Association. article in the Feb. 1999 *Chronicle* on this topic). Edit the source document for the translators (see the article in the May 2001 *Chronicle*). Translation project managers will benefit from ATA membership.

IN-HOUSE TRANSLATION PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- Using an agency may produce slower turnaround and higher costs. My company's experience is that in-house translation of manuals and brochures produces documented per-page cost savings of 50% to 80%. It requires a time investment up front to establish relationships with reliable translators, editors, and DTP vendors, but the savings are substantial and you have more control over priorities among your projects, which can change from week to week. For in-house translation project management, your company must be committed to this approach, with a full-time person in charge of translation projects and a company-wide attitude that translations are a requirement for global marketing, not an afterthought or "sometimes unavoidable expense."

An agency may only save you a little time: employing an agency adds at least one layer of middle management, and the client is accountable for the agency's work. If you use an agency, make sure that you can always contact the project manager (PM), and even their translator(s), in some cases.

Translators' experience with your products and terminology is extremely valuable for quality and consistency, and agency clients cannot control which translator is assigned to our projects, although most agencies try to reassign the same translator to subsequent projects. Many translators prefer to work directly with clients, especially if the client observes such relational courtesies as making sure invoices are paid promptly, being organized, and not asking them to do things they cannot do.

- In-house DTP has been the single most advantageous detail in the translation process for our company. Some agencies utilize DTP operators without second-language experience, and possibly no assurance of DTP operator continuity from one job to the next.
- A good, experienced DTP person can handle 95% of our revisions, which often consist of revised part numbers, dates and data requiring no translation. I have no experience with the per-page cost of minor revisions because we have always handled them in-house. Qualified reviewers should review all revisions.

If the in-house project manager is DTP software-capable, many changes can be handled instantly, with no instructions filtered through the agency PM to the agency's DTP person and eventually back to the client, who has the ultimate responsibility that the changes are correctly made.

- I try to have two well-qualified freelance translators for each major language, so I can alternate between them for translating and proofreading, and protect against unavailability due to vacation time or unscheduled events in their lives. I try to find new translators through collegial references, but sometimes use the ATA directory.
- If you outsource translation project management to an agency, use two agencies, not just one. This will allow you to compare actual costs, turnaround times and overall service instead of relying on promises, although I compare actual costs only as a reality check, not to select the lowest-cost bidder. It will also protect you against fallout from agency mergers (see the article in *Multilingual Computing & Technology* magazine, Vol. 11. Issue 5, "Mergers Can Affect Localization Quality"), provide insurance for times of project overload, and allow you to take advantage of each agency's strengths. Your PM at one agency may be French, at the other Italian, and you can allocate projects accordingly. While a PM can handle projects in any language, she or he may be able to answer quickest linguistic questions about their own language.

- The virtual client-agency proximity created by telecommunications is still not the same as being located near enough to your agency for face-to-face meetings. I have found it invaluable to see the agency's physical setup and to meet key personnel so we are more than a telephone voice or email signature to each other. Such meetings are essential early in the relationship, in my experience, although quarterly or semi-annual meetings may suffice after a couple of years.

I have heard of successful long-distance client-agency setups, but also hear that all relationships benefit from at least occasional meetings.

My worst agency experience was a transatlantic one, and the downfall of our relationship came about through our inability to truly communicate through email. Even telephone calls could not salvage the damage to the client-agency relationship that resulted from misunderstood email communications. People, and people skills, count for a lot.

CORRECTIONS AND THE REVIEW PROCESS

- The fastest, easiest and most accurate method is for reviewers to work with hardcopy. There are too many pitfalls with software incompatibilities and cybersnags to attempt on-line reviews or corrections with a variety of reviewers in different locations.
- I used to use a courier service to send the actual pages both ways, but now I send PDFs by email and ask the reviewer to fax back only the pages that need corrections. (If they are impossible to read, the originals can be couriered.)
- I have had excellent results from specifying that the content review be done after the DTP (typesetting) and proofing, so the content reviewer can see all elements in place on the page. This improves readability and eliminates the need to proof for copy-and-paste errors in flowing the translated text from the "galleys" to the electronic template.

I acknowledge that this is not the normal order of steps. Although it works best for us, clients and agencies should adhere to procedures that work well for them.

- Corrections must be written carefully, in colored ink, in easy-to-read handwriting. The DTP person who will input the corrections in all likelihood will not be familiar with the target language and will lack contextual familiarity with vocabulary, spellings, subject/number agreements and some languages' punctuation peculiarities. A qualified reviewer should proofread all revisions.

COST CONTROL

- Reduce the quantity of English text, even though it may take longer to produce succinct text.
- If you can, maximize "wordless" (illustrated) instructions: "No text, no translation work." (Do not embed callouts in graphics that will need to be edited: better are references that use a numbering system with a translatable list outside of the graphic.)
- Lay out English pages with extra white space, to accommodate the inevitable text expansion in translation. This enables "mirror" pagination for all languages, which is a huge benefit at revision time.
- The wider the columns in your layout, the fewer the hyphenation problems and questions.
- Extract new text and send only this for translation. A DTP vendor (in-house person is best) who is experienced with your documents will know where to find repeated text that has been translated previously and can be reused.
- Convert as much repeated text to boilerplate as possible.

- If time permits, don't start any translation project until the English version is completed. If it is necessary to send out for translation section by section, as completed, be aware that re-translation of some material may be necessitated by improvements made during the completion of later sections. Be forewarned that section-by-section translations sometimes require more time to complete than waiting for a completed source document, and are usually more frustrating to control.

About the author: Michael Whitman has been Translation Projects Manager at Hypertherm, Inc. in Hanover, NH since 1991, and has produced translations of technical manuals and sales materials using translation agencies and in-house project management. He writes on translation issues and has presented workshops and seminars at national and regional conferences of STC and ATA. Email questions to michael.whitman@hypertherm.com.