

Selecting a Translation Agency

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It can be difficult for technical writers to hand over our carefully crafted English documentation to a translation agency. We take great pride in our work and may cast a watchful eye over it as it is reviewed, modified, and distributed by colleagues. Yet the translation process, to some extent, is beyond our control. Few of us are sufficiently fluent in a second language to verify whether a translation meets our high standards.

Working with a translation agency can be a leap of faith, but it also can be a rewarding experience. Our common goal is to communicate our message to the world effectively and efficiently. Some of us may feel anxious when we start interviewing translation companies, and wonder what questions we should ask and how far we should pursue discussions. It might be helpful to approach the translation process with the idea that it will enhance and reinforce the best methods you adhered to when creating your English documentation. With this in mind, we offer some advice to those about to hire a translation firm.

Taking Stock Internally

When considering translation agencies, among the first questions that technical writers ask are

“What questions should I ask my managers before I start interviewing translation firms?” and “What information do I need to have a productive conversation with an agency?” Answering the following questions before you start interviewing firms will help you choose the right agency for your needs.

Are we really translation-ready?

Two factors to consider when answering this question are the current state of the documentation to be translated and the company culture and processes that may affect the translation workflow.

Any technical writer can assess the readiness of documentation for translation with the help of checklists and guidelines obtained from translation agencies and professional groups such as the American Translators Association (ATA). (Also check out the article “Is Your Documentation Translation-Ready?” in the May 2001 issue of *Intercom*.) Can you give an agency a written overview of your documentation procedures? How do you handle revisions, and how often do they occur? Is your documentation cross-platform in nature, and what desktop publishing programs do you use?



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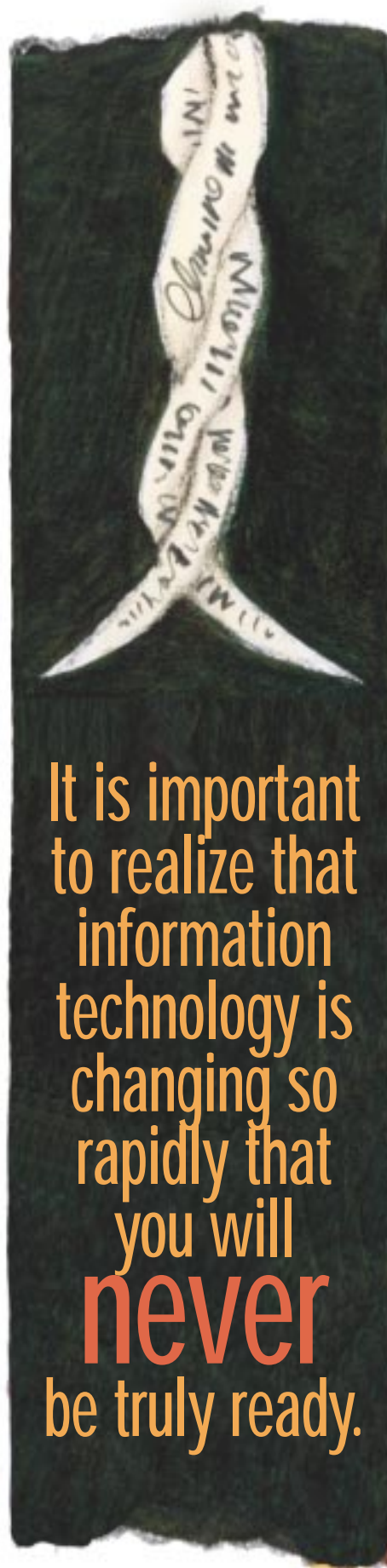
The fact that you are concerned about your company's translation readiness means you have already won part of the battle: Many companies are completely reactive (as opposed to proactive) when it comes to translation. For example, some companies have exported products to Europe without giving any thought to EU translation regulations, only to have their products stopped at the border owing to regulatory noncompliance. At that point, rush translations might be required before any products are allowed through customs. Translation agencies are familiar with these ever-evolving regulatory issues, so take advantage of their experience by asking questions *before* a problem arises.

It is important to realize that information technology is changing so rapidly that you will never be truly ready: The more complex your documentation process, the greater the need to consider how any anticipated changes will affect your translations. Keep your translation agency project managers informed about radical changes to your English documentation process. It should come as no surprise that communication is key.

What are your current and future translation needs?

Knowing the answer to this question could help you negotiate a substantial savings in projected translation costs. At first, your managers might want only the administration manual and user guide translated. Perhaps later they will want the user interface, the Web site, the marketing materials, and the training manuals translated. Putting together a comprehensive translation strategy could save you thousands of dollars in the long run.

The advent of translation memory software may have a strong positive effect on the quality and price of your translations, but only if you communicate your needs before the translation process begins. For example, you may have product specifications for two or three product lines that are very similar, and memory software can help you leverage those repetitions into substantial savings and improved consistency. As an added benefit, if a



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translation agency knows that more work of a certain type is coming its way, it may be able to offer you some guidance or advice that will save you even more money down the road while also paving the way for smoother project turn-around.

What timeline do you envision for completion?

This question is particularly important if you have a large amount of documentation to be translated. Typically, translation is one of the last steps in a company's documentation process, and translation agencies are often faced with very tight deadlines for the completion of various projects. If you want an agency to translate a very large project in a short amount of time, it may need to assemble an expanded team of translators. Extra editors may be needed to ensure linguistic consistency. This situation affects not only the quality of the end product but also the cost charged to the client, as some documentation may have to be rushed.

Are you willing to consider long-term rather than short-term cost savings?

A number of tools and methods can be used to reduce future expenses, but some of them require larger initial costs in time and/or money. For example, have you and your company considered setting up your documentation in a single-source framework? Have you considered the enormous cost savings that can be realized through the use of translation memory tools? Have you looked through all of your written material to determine if you've made a concerted effort to "recycle" text from your user guides to your Web site to your technical specifications?

Do you plan to translate the user interface into the same target language(s) as the documentation?

To answer this question, you will want to consult with your software engineers, Web developers, and international employees.

It is very important that any user documentation remain consistent with your user interface. Large corporations often possess a hodgepodge of documenta-

tion: Some user interfaces are translated, some are not; some screenshots in user guides are translated, some are not. Very often companies will try to save costs by leaving one documentation component in English, which is counterproductive from an end user's standpoint. If a customer is sitting in his office with a user interface in French and a user manual containing screenshots in English, it will be expensive from a customer service standpoint to help him resolve the difficulties.

This is not to say that user interfaces should always be translated. It is important to consider the opinions of any international employees that you may have in the target country. In many countries, the targeted end users may be quite comfortable working with an English-language user interface, particularly in the medical and software fields.

Looking for Red Flags

In a typical year most translation agencies deal with hundreds of companies and organizations from dozens of fields, and trying to impose one way of doing things on potential clients is a recipe for conflict and miscommunication. A good translation firm will be happy to share its expertise with potential clients. Make sure that the agency you choose works with qualified translators and has already integrated translation memory tools into its translation process.

Many agencies will have opinions regarding translation workflow and how they can help clients receive quality translations at a good price. Most agencies are careful to modify their procedures when doing so will work to their clients' benefit—so you should be skeptical of anyone who seems inflexible.

Questions: Ours and Theirs

As with almost any interview process, the key ultimately lies in the follow-up questions you ask. But the following questions should get you off to a good start when interviewing a translation agency.

How long has the agency been in business, and can it provide verifiable client testimonials? A lot of new agencies pass them-

selves off as much larger and more experienced than they really are.

How long has the agency been translating documentation for your industry? Each industry has its own vocabulary, and you want a firm that is comfortable with yours. An agency that focuses on the translation of medical software applications may not be the best choice for, say, a manufacturer of high-end kitchen appliances.

What services does the agency offer? Many agencies offer desktop publishing services; some smaller agencies do not. One agency may offer English technical writing services and software localization,



while another prefers to specialize in a different area. Think of additional services you may need in the future, and ask if the agency provides them.

Into what languages does the agency translate? With what languages does the agency work most often?

Are the agency's translators ATA-accredited? Beware of cut-rate agencies that are vague about the qualifications of their translators: They may cost you more in the long run.

How experienced are the agency's project managers? Will you work with one specific project manager, or with various project managers? How current are the project manager's information technology skills?

Will he or she be able to handle a complex project that might involve *FrameMaker*, *RoboHelp*, and translation memory components—and deliver on time with minimal difficulty?

What type of quality control processes does the agency employ?

What are the agency's average turnarounds on projects of a given size? Most translators can translate between 2,000 and 3,000 words per day, but many variables may come into play, such as difficulty of material and production requirements.

How does the agency handle client changes or revisions on documentation that has already been translated? If the changes are minor, some agencies will implement them free of charge. If the changes are numerous and stylistic in nature, additional charges may apply.

What is the agency's policy regarding translation memory databases? Will it provide you with a translation memory based on your translations, or will you be told that the memory belongs to the agency?

Kristin Conradi, who has worked as a localization manager for more than three years for Macromedia's *Dreamweaver* (and related products), offers some additional questions:

How many translators does the agency have on site, and how long have they worked with the agency? Be aware that the number of in-house translators an agency employs may not be particularly relevant under all circumstances. But if an agency has only two Spanish translators in-house, how can they possibly remain current on terminology and trends in a wide variety of fields? Not all English technical writers are qualified to write both software manuals and user guides for lawnmowers, and most translators are proficient in a limited number of fields.

What types of tests must translators pass before they can work for the agency? What are the minimal qualifications?

What backup plans does the agency have? To illustrate the importance of this question, Conradi offers the following example: “If an agency’s strongest production person is on your project, what happens if this person is suddenly out of the office for a stretch of time? How will the agency ensure that your schedule and level of quality will continue to be met?”

Before you make that first phone call to a translation agency, check its Web site for a FAQ section. Many of the questions you were going to lead off with may already be answered, in which case your first interview can be targeted specifically to your project needs.

What kinds of questions should you expect to hear from an agency? Typically, the sales representatives will initially ask you general questions about the history of your company, the types of products you sell, your target markets, and your anticipated volume of work. Be prepared to answer specific questions about your documentation process, preferred computer platforms and software applications, and your anticipated timetable for certain projects.

Like many of the people we talked to on the technical writing listserve, Conradi likes translation firms that are proactive. “I like when vendors can anticipate the problems I face,” she says. “If I ask them how they would handle a certain situation, and they explain how they resolved a similar situation, I feel more comfortable with them.”

Watching Your Language(s)

When you ask firms if they can translate to your target language, remember that different versions of the same language may be spoken in different countries. You do not, for example, want a translator from Portugal translating documents that will be used by Brazilians—the two countries have their own versions of Portuguese. Similarly, if your documentation is being translated for use by clients in Mexico, you want a translator who is fluent in Mexican Spanish, not Castilian Spanish.

A Realistic Approach to Tests

Some agencies may suggest that a

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client send a test file similar to the kind of documentation that will eventually be translated. Remember, though, that it can be difficult to estimate the cost of a project on the basis of test files. Because all translation agencies prepare their quotes based in part on raw word count and other production factors, it is not feasible to extrapolate a translation cost from sample files. Potential clients should use sample translations to help judge quality rather than cost.

Says Conradi, “We’ve also been known to have various vendors for the same language do a sample translation for us. We then run the translations by our regional offices and ask for their feedback.” Test files can help in a variety of ways. First, the agency can send sample files to its preferred translators to determine whether there will be language-specific terminology problems or challenges. Second, if the sample file is submitted in its native format (e.g., *FrameMaker*, *Interleaf*, *QuarkXPress*), file compatibility and layout style can be evaluated. This will help the agency’s desktop publishers evaluate the proposed project and identify potential problems. In short, test files can be particularly helpful for companies that have never had documentation or other materials translated. If you decide to do a test translation, make sure your sample files are short but representative of your project as a whole.

Most reputable agencies provide test translations free of charge. You need to understand, though, that test translations will give you very little insight into the type of relationship you might have with a translation firm. Don’t assume that you should send a test file for every project—agencies have to pay translators for these translations, and if you have established a sound working relationship with an agency, there should be little need to constantly test translators.

The main purpose of a test translation is to determine whether the agency’s product is of acceptable quality. Your company should perform an internal review of the test translation, ideally by an employee or distributor in the target country. The problem is that a linguistic critique is subjective by nature: Your reviewer may dislike the translator’s writ-

ing style and give it a poor review even though there is nothing technically wrong with the translation. Ideally, you should submit a test translation to more than one reviewer.

A very small number of agencies have been caught using the “bait and switch” tactic. It works like this: The agency sends a sample file to an excellent translator to make a favorable impression on a client. Once the agency lands the account, it switches to a less talented and lower-paid translator. If you have an in-house language reviewer, have him or her do a quick check of each translation to make sure that they are of acceptable quality.

Conradi also strongly recommends that you check the client references that a firm gives you. When you call the references, don’t be afraid to ask questions: They knew that their agreement to serve as a reference for a firm could mean that they’d have to field a lot of questions. Just be careful not to abuse the privilege.

Talking Money

Most writers want to know when in the interview process they should start asking about project costs. The answer: Whenever you are prepared to discuss the volume and scope of your work. Most agencies will offer discounts for volume, but only after you have discussed the agency’s quality standards and safeguards. Anyone can get a cheap translation, but if the price sounds too good to be true, the firm is probably cutting corners.

Please note that not all languages—or file types—are equal when it comes to price. You will pay more for a Korean translation typeset into a *FrameMaker* document than you will for a Spanish translation of a straightforward *Word* document. Make sure the agency’s quotation spells out exactly what services you will receive. Don’t assume that a cost of thirty cents per word for a German translation includes desktop publishing or editing services. Make sure you specify what type of final output you require—you probably won’t be able to open a Japanese *Word* document on your desktop computer, so you may need the agency to generate PDF files for you to send to your customers or reviewers. Take advantage of the experience and exper-

tise of your agency project manager—he or she should be happy to help.

Other Keys to Success

For a translation project to be successful, you need to establish good communication during your interview process. A translation firm’s cost and time estimates are only as good as the information you provide.

“As much as possible should be explained up front,” Conradi says, “[including] processes for engineering and production, time required for review,

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any dependencies, and so on. Localization is schedule-driven, and the way to have a reliable schedule is for both parties to understand the tasks in the same way. If anything changes, this must be communicated *early* and the impact determined as clearly as possible.”

Most technical writers that we talked to agreed on several other cardinal rules that should be followed from the earliest stages of the process:

- Document everything in writing. As one writer told us, conversations between

the translation firm and its clients can be lengthy, and even the best notetakers (at both ends of the conversation) will miss something. Communicating everything in writing, either via e-mail or snail mail, will help both sides as you move forward with the process.

- Inevitably, there will be difficulties with one or more of your translation projects. Not all problems are predictable, and new challenges may arise during the production process. If you have established a sound working relationship with an agency, trust your project manager’s judgment and try to work through the problems. Successful agencies provide a high level of customer service and have an interest in ensuring that your translation projects are completed with a minimum of difficulty.
- Trust your instincts. If you have doubts during the interview process, look for another firm. Translation projects are very detailed endeavors, and there is little room for miscommunication, mistrust, and misunderstanding—and any of the three could cost everyone involved time and money.

Some of the information we have provided may be a little daunting. Translations are highly detailed, time-consuming projects that require everyone’s project management skills to be in absolutely peak form. But almost every writer we surveyed had nothing but nice things to say about the firms they had hired and the unexpected improvements in their documentation they’d gained during their translation projects. You just have to know the right questions to ask. ❖

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