The business of translation involves more than a working knowledge of two languages or a few courses in multilingual programming. It is a field that requires knowledge in a variety of things, though language skills and multilingual computing capabilities are crucial. These authors should help anyone wanting to get started, providing advice both to those needing translations and to those wanting to get paid to create one — or many.

Annette Hemera begins with an overview of how to make it in the translation industry, and Jost Zetzsche looks at the tools the industry utilizes. George Rimalower lays out the expanding need for translators in the US market and how to take advantage of the opportunity this provides. Tim Altanero provides details about how to get personal or more complex documents translated, and Dena Bugel-Shunra finishes things off with two series of tips: what to do and what not to do to become a successful translator.

There are, of course, many resources available to translators. This is a good starting point.

The Editors
The characteristics of a “good translator” have been repeated many times in many places. Advisors often explain how to translate a contract or operation manual; how to define adaptation; how to recognize a good translation memory (TM) and/or dictionary program; where to find reliable glossaries on the net and how to recognize problematic source files; to weight the number of words in your translation; and how to open a zip file. Consistently reliable quality and efficient use of tools are necessary but not sufficient to become a successful translator. Unless these things are supported by thoughtful and consistent management, a translator cannot expect more than temporary success. While many translators live under the illusion that as freelancers the only thing they will have to do is translate, a good measure of true success is how well the translator can manage his or her one-person business.

Like it or not, in addition to translating, a freelance translator has to juggle all the tasks needed to keep a business running, no matter what the size. In this regard, there is no difference between Microsoft and John Smith Translations because a one-person venture has to traverse every single step in the “value chain” just like its corporate fellows. It has to establish the business, organize it, and maintain it at optimum operational level.

The freelance translator becomes the production manager, quality controller, operational director, supervisor, sales manager, advertising and PR specialist, IT director, chief stockholder and board chair all in one. Sometimes the posts even conflict, and short-term interests can be very different. Most translators dive head first into their companies without any training in the business world. Many go through the steps of getting a freelance operation permit, a computer and a stack of dictionaries, and proceed to bury themselves at their desks translating night and day. They treat anyone who offers accounting or tax advice, advertising recommendations, or chances to register themselves on a website at low cost as an impediment, and consider the effort of doing any of these things a pain in the neck.

However, a freelancer needs to spend a good portion of his or her working time planning, advertising, bidding for jobs, preparing invoices and accounts, and conducting cost calculations, to put a business on track to long-term success. Most translation schools focus exclusively on theoretical information and offer nil in the way of practical tips. So, professionals just entering the workforce have many difficulties to overcome that take away time and energy from the real job. Lack of knowledge about how to run a translation business, the outcome of intrinsic shortcomings in translation courses, is the basic reason for the huge vacuum on the Hungarian and the overall Eastern and Central European language services market. On the one hand, here in Hungary we see a large number of theoretically trained but inexperienced translators hoping in vain to be entered into client databases, while on the other, we have clients unable to find translators to cover their day-to-day capacities fighting bitterly to secure good vendors.

Since most specialized translators study translation to supplement a primary course of studies such as technology or law, they tend to treat a degree as a specialist translator as a lifebelt, a second profession to fall back on if they are unable to find a job in their primary field. If worst comes to worst, they can work as freelance translators, they think. Given the ad-hoc nature of the choice, most professionals who start businesses as translators have not surveyed the business climate, have not garnered basic information on the language services market, have not mapped out demands, and have no idea about minimum investment costs or, obviously, expected inflow. In other words, they have no idea what they are up against.

Planning and management

The first and most important issue that a freelancer should focus on is the life of the business and its day-to-day operation. Before delving into the planning details, however, it is important to stress that according to modern management science, a comprehensive marketing outlook should permeate the entire planning operation and indeed the entire business. Once we have sketched out our market, the next step is to summarize it in a concrete action plan. That means knowing exactly what we want to sell, whom we want to sell it to, for how much, and how to convince our customers to buy from us. Many people today are hesitant about marketing, and many business managers vehemently reject the very word. The reasons are often understandable. The facts are that marketing is really an abstract science, that marketing work is hard to define, and that it is very difficult to account for, which is what managers tend to find most painful. Business managers themselves are often unaware that many of their own actions are really marketing. They are marketing when day after day they seek to determine how their business stands compared to competitors, what opportunities they have, what are the optimum ways of presenting the business, or of communicating with and maintaining liaisons. If a business manager begins doing these same activities in a deliberate and organized way, he or she has taken a giant step forward toward the long-term development of the business.

There is no need to think in terms of exceedingly complicated or elaborate procedures when talking about planning or about
to check to see that things are done and to enlist outside help when it becomes necessary, in other words, when your business is ready to grow.

Planning is really just setting your company’s goal and deciding exactly how to reach it. Business experts say that when it comes to goals, it is worth having SMART ones — Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. After defining your goals (such as turnover of €50,000 a year within two years and a 10% profit and at least 15 regular customers who require translations from English to Dutch in engineering industry subjects), you will now have to consider all the resources and tools needed to meet them. Then you need to determine what technologies (TMs, means of telecommunication, hardware and software) are needed to support them, how much it costs to produce these services, how much they can be sold for, through what sales channels, what type of agency, and for how big a price differential. In addition, it is also important to learn how much tax you will have to pay on your inflow and, finally, what type of company you will need to establish as far as the law is concerned. Read a few related studies focused on your home country and on the world at large, visit the websites of various language service providers, electronic marketplaces and community pages, subscribe to internet forums and find out what language combinations people request work in, and in what specialized areas. See the deadlines they are offering and the prices they charge.

Then check the other side — the service providers — and see what they are offering and the methods and technologies they work with. For instance, say you have a law degree and a certificate as a specialist translator in your pocket and originally planned to translate from German to Italian. By doing your homework, you discover that there is an abundance of freelance translators offering these exact services. So, it becomes clear that you will need to look into something else, to offer a product in demand and in short supply. At this point you will have to decide whether to focus on a specific section of law, such as real estate documents. In marketing terminology this is called the period of differentiation and positioning, meaning that you provide the largest variety of services that differ from those offered by your competitors (all your freelance translator colleagues) to build a special position on the market. You will need to do this without limiting your scope of movement or typecasting yourself as too much of a specialist or you’ll find yourself missing out on jobs you could easily do. This is why you will need to continuously sound out the market, which means continuously revisiting and updating the plan and goals, even if you are the only one ever to see them.

**Technology**

After finishing your business plan, you will know how much money you have to make and how much you can make, and what you will need to cover monthly expenses. People rarely think about it, but often their profits are a direct outcome of the efficiency of their work organization, meaning both that they must have all necessary tools and know how to take advantage of them. In other words, their businesses need to be properly organized and technologically supported.

Today’s businesses are a great deal easier to organize and manage, given the wide variety of advanced technology, hardware and software they can access. Countless IT implements and computer programs can make it easier for client and supplier to keep in touch, to archive and protect data, to monitor visits to websites, to bill and prepare invoices, to plan turnover, to handle project management and so on. Even if you are a one-person business, you should be aware of available tools and know how to use them well. This goes for translation technology, as well. Keep your knowledge level up-to-the-minute. In today’s world
many vendors are still uncomfortable with computers and respond with difficulty or inflexibility if a client asks them to try out a new tool. In general, it is always hard to talk translators into learning something new. This is why translators who are open to development and to learning new tools are highly valued. A growing number of translation bureaus offer free training and free software and support to willing translators.

As far as IT setup, it might be worth thanking your cousin, the enthusiastic amateur, for the offer to help, but seek out a professional to design the technology for your business, to help in putting together the most satisfactory configuration and to select the programs, antivirus software, operation systems and peripheries. A professional will also be able to help you in finding cheaper procurement sources and will see to it that you do not have to spend your nights installing software and figuring out which cable goes where. A professional also can give you pointers on setting up a website, and it certainly cannot hurt if that professional is at home in the realm of language services.

It is worth planning your one-person business in a way that calculates with minimum and expected growth. You have calculated the minimum income you need as well as the maximum attainable and the amount of work involved for each. You know the size of the workspace you’ll need, including your computer’s memory capacity, the speed you’ll need for your data transfer, and how many envelopes and hard copy files you’ll need. Still, it is wise to give yourself a specific amount of extra room. When making plans, however, be careful how high you leap, and refrain from choosing unjustifyably expensive equipment. Do not buy much more than the equipment you’ll need to get started, and do not get the most expensive tools on the market.

Marketing

Your website should not be limited to your working languages. It should be legible in all languages used in your target markets. Websites should be easy to modify, so yours should have an easily understandable and manageable administrative platform. It should include a succinct but attention-getting introduction, a list of references, sample translations serving as teasers, and a feedback page. Don’t forget to include photographs, for they personalize the site, turning you into their friend. Make certain that your contact information is visible and easy to understand.

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After setting up your working conditions and ideal working environment, your job is to make sure that potential clients not only know you exist but, if need be, can find you quickly and easily, which gives them an added incentive to choose you from among the variety of service providers available. The marketing concept does not end when you have chosen your possible customers and targeted a market. You will have to pick up that thread again and again. To be more accurate, you must never let it go. After you have defined your target customers, you will have to see to it that you have all necessary marketing conditions in place to sell your product. This means that you must offer your potential customers regular and up-to-date information so that, should they need your services, they will have all the information they need in hand. This includes knowing how and where to find you.

The first and most important step here is to compile appropriate introductory material — a professional portfolio. Basic features of good informative material include succinctness, essential information, easy-to-comprehend style, and a clear presentation of your professional experience in reverse chronological order, with your most recent jobs listed first. Do not include too many areas of specialization, and do not express interest in “all” subjects. This will not make you more attractive and is one of the surest ways to frighten off a potential customer.

It is also worth preparing separate designs for different markets and cultures and using them should you get a concrete request for information. What might be quite satisfactory in one country is often insufficient in another. It is important to have good references, but it is also obvious that a beginner will not have a long list of recommendations. Do not let that get you down! As a beginner, you can offer to provide a test translation free of charge, and you can set your prices below those charged by more experienced colleagues.

Don’t forget that customers are struggling to contend with a constant shortage of vendors, and there are only a few truly well-trained professionals who produce high-quality work. At the same time, the market has been growing year after year, so it does have room for a beginner freelancer. As far as evolving an ideal clientele is concerned, it is worth working with fewer regular clients and developing long-term relationships with them. Clients willingly work with vendors they have come to know and trust. They like people with whom they have fostered smooth and successful relationships in which the project manager and translator understand one another without lengthy explanations, allowing project time to be used for quality assurance instead of having to clarify details for one side or the other. Translation and language services in general are an extraordinarily delicate trust-based activity, so if your work is reliable and conscientious, your reward will be guaranteed work. It should be worth it to you to register with as many portals as possible and to subscribe to as many professional materials and gazettes as you can. As you gain experience, you will be able to choose among the more and less interesting and useful ones, and know which of them you definitely should take the time to study. You can improve your professional reputation and name recognition if you become an active participant in the virtual world of freelancers. If you are present on a wide variety of forums and can help colleagues with your comments and concrete advice, you will be building your own name. Do not believe that a beginner cannot be a help. No one knows everything, and something that you know about may be precisely what another colleague needs information on.

Project management – administration
Although you may be a freelancer and only have to manage a few translation projects, when the amount of work increases there will be parallel tasks and deadlines, multiple file transfers and glossaries, accounting and invoicing for several projects at once — in other words, project management and quality control. Think about it for just a moment. Last week you delivered a 50-page purchase order and then began preparing a glossary for a bid you have to deliver in two weeks. In the meantime, the terminologist of the work you just delivered calls and asks you to check a few expressions because the client has made some suggestions that look good. In that instant you will have to perform faultlessly on multiple levels, and if you are not careful, things can get mixed up and you might lose control.

To wade through the minefield of project management and survive intact requires maintaining a very clear picture of the sequence of steps, the building blocks of various functions and exactly where they fit into the translation chain. You must have an overview of the entire process and know exactly how each operation fits into the whole. You must very clearly see where your responsibility begins and others’ ends, and know exactly what you have to do, what questions you have to ask, and what information you must have before you begin your work. Otherwise, you put yourself at risk, jeopardize others’ success and spend endless days arguing with your clients.

It is worth thinking about the above. It will improve your chances, and eventually, your efforts will begin to command money.
Imagine this scenario: A new face shows up at the 2008 regional translators’ annual gathering and introduces herself as someone who just got started as a translator. She admits that languages are not her strong point, but says she’s sure she can get by with good dictionaries and spell-checkers. “I’ll predict she’ll be spending that party pretty much left to herself.”

Now imagine the same scenario with a twist: This time the new translator says that she feels very strong linguistically, but, boy, her computer must have crashed six times yesterday and she can’t even install the latest version of Microsoft Office, let alone specialized programs for translators. I predict that she will be surrounded by a couple dozen translators all too eager to chime in with “Me, too! Me, too!”

It’s clear that translation professionals come from different stock than, say, engineers. Here is an interesting way to prove that point. When was the last time you went to an engineering website and found an image of the patron saint of engineers, St. Patrick, or the cool patroness Lady Godiva? I’m sure it’s been awhile. How about translation websites with St. Jerome, the patron saint of translators? There must be hundreds! And though I see no problem with identifying with one of the giants of our profession’s history, it’s dangerous to get stuck.

So, given our industry climate, is translation technology an oxymoron? Not on your life! It’s just that getting translators to use it is sometimes about as easy as making your kids clean their rooms or brush their teeth.

Translation technology: ready, set, go!

About ten years ago, long-time translation technology veteran Alan Melby released a typology of “Eight Types of Translation Technology” (see www.ttt.org/technology/8types.pdf). They consist of:

- 1: Infrastructure
- 2-4: Term-level before, during and after translation
- 5-7: Segment-level before, during and after translation
- 8: Translation workflow and billing management

Interestingly, the order of the items corresponds loosely to the timeline with which the language industry attached importance to them.

The first principle, infrastructure, is concerned with communication, systems to create and manage documents, and database capabilities. This infrastructure formed the technological basis that allowed us to use translation technology in the first place and turned us from individual service suppliers into a relatively well-connected industry.

Infrastructure and term- and segment-level language processing clearly remain of basic importance today, but it is the last aspect — translation workflow and billing management — that is causing the most excitement and the greatest number of new products in the industry.

Let’s first look at the six language-related principles in detail and see how we can match them with some of the past, existing or upcoming technologies and tools.

Term-level processing

Term-level before translation, the monolingual and bilingual term extraction for the creation of termbases and glossaries in preparation for translation projects, is probably the most overlooked area in practical terms. Many non-translation-related tools allow for indexing and concordancing of monolingual materials, but a surprising number of tools are also specifically geared toward the language industry.

Essentially, two kinds of technologies are used to achieve the extraction of terms, matching of term pairs and glossary creation: those that work primarily on a mathematical level (“if word A always appears in sentences for which word B always appears in the translated sentences, then these words must form a word pair”) and others that work with underlying dictionaries and other language materials. Not surprisingly, the results from tools that use linguistic material are more accurate and superior to their competitors, but the number of languages that are supported is naturally more limited. Tools such as SDL PhraseFinder, TEMIS XTS, and Similis basically support English, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and, in the case of XTS, a smattering of additional European languages.

It is anyone’s guess why these tools are not being used more consistently, but I would assume that non-billable time plays a significant role in this.

Term-level during translation refers to the automatic terminology lookup that virtually all translation environment tools (TEnTs) perform. The term TEnT is used for...
the tools that are often referred to as CAT tools and that contain a translation memory (TM), a terminology maintenance, and a translation interface component. A terminology database, conceptually a highly customized dictionary that was either created in the previous principle or is created manually before or during the translation, presents project- or client-specific term pairs alongside other supporting information to the translation professional as he or she works through a text.

While all TEnTs offer this feature, the way they use it differs significantly. Not surprisingly, the two tool vendors that early on released their terminology components as standalone tools — STAR and TRADOS — have complex engines behind their terminology components, whereas many of the other tools use mere bilingual glossaries.

How the terminology component is integrated into the workflow also differs greatly and includes anything from a mere highlighting of source terms that are found in the termbase to the proactive display of matches to automatically entering them into (pre-) translated segments. Especially this last feature, coupled with the complexity or ease of entering the terms in the first place — unlike building up a TM, there is always a manual component of entering matches into a terminology database — makes a significant difference in how much the terminology component is used by the translator. The more immediate the benefit and the lower the cost (or the lower the entry or processing speed), the more likely it is to be used.

Term-level after translation refers to the terminology consistency check and the non-allowed terminology check. For this task there are both specialized tools (such as QA Distiller, Quintillion, ErrorSpy, or X Bench) and increasingly many TEnTs that support these features internally. And in fact, it was the rise of these third-party tools that seems to have given the TEnTs the push they needed to implement quality assurance features such as white- and blacklisting terminology in the last two or three years.

From a technological point of view, a lot of the translation memory and MT processes. TM lookup — the leveraging of content from translation memories and/or corpora — is at the heart of what TEnTs such as Across, Déjà Vu, Heartsome, jiveFUSION, Lingotek, MemoQ, MetaTexis, MultiTrans, OmegaT, SDLX, STAR Transit, Swordfish, Trados, Wordfast and any number of other tools do. In regard to this principle, a translator or a project manager may have different expectations: the translator is primarily interested in the ease and practicality of the translation environment; for the corporate user, workflow and translation
management are of greater concern. These different expectations have put tool vendors in an awkward spot, not only resulting in different versions for the different user groups but also in shifting emphases on the different groups in different stages of the tool development cycles.

MT is experiencing its greatest revival since the excitement that surrounded it in the 1950s. And here again, different stakeholders have very different agendas. Though MT by and large remains the best-loved enemy of the freelance translator and is eyed with suspicion by smaller language service providers (LSPs), large LSPs and large translation buyers have long been running projects that are too large or too time-consuming for human translation through primarily statistical MT.

One of the more exciting developments today is partnerships between TM and MT vendors. This has the feel of the prodigal son written all over it, considering that TM was originally a subset of machine translation.

Segment-level after translation — missing segment detection and format and grammar checks — is the counterpart to the white- and blacklisting of terminology and terminology consistency checks on the term-level. And just as those developments were driven by the aforementioned third-party QA tools, so it is here. While few grammar checks are in place (aside from the tools that use the Microsoft Word interface), virtually all TEnTs provide a large variety of mechanical, non-language-related checks. These include missing segment detection and format checks, but also verification of numbers, punctuation and special characters. On a translation-related level, the introduction of QA features, including the term checks, has been one of the biggest pushes in the tool development during the last couple of years. And while it probably will take another year or two until they are accepted and widely used by the majority of translators, they are here to stay.

The workflow hurdle

Still, it’s the last principle, translation workflow and billing management, that has thrown the language industry and its tool vendors into a tailspin lately. While there are certainly improvements to be made on the first seven principles, they are typically accepted as a given and are implemented in some way or the other on the translator’s workplace or the LSP’s network. But when sophisticated translation buyers who were used to complex software-based workflow and accounting applications took a more active role in the process, and when at the same time some global LSPs’ growth could primarily be attributed to their sophisticated workflow products, there was an almost universal call for tools that would support these aspects of the business. Tool vendors responded with a number of different solutions.

There are a number of powerful, web-based tools for LSPs such as Plunet, Worx and Beetext that cover various aspects of project management. Through partnerships or connectivity with TEnTs, these tools attempt to cover most technological aspects of the translation process.

Translation management systems (TMS) such as Idiom WorldServer and other corporate products from SDL and Across, along with any number of company-internal tools such as Lionbridge’s Logoport and Elanex’s ElanexINSIDE, also cover workflow and project management. However, these products essentially cover all eight principles: the infrastructure, the term- and segment-level processing before, during and after translation, and the translation workflow aspects. Though the market experienced some hiccups earlier this year when Idiom was acquired by SDL, this should be a market segment with significant growth potential.

The goal is in sight! Have we run through our translation technology survey in Olympic speed?

The cloud

Well, we’re almost done. We have so far assumed that these principles refer to desktop-based or network-based computing, but they also apply to cloud-based computing. The internet has enabled translation technology users to collaborate and share resources — something that already seems natural in the days of Web 2.0 and beyond, but is still new in the lives of most translation professionals. Projects such as TDA, the TAUS Data Association, or TM Marketplace allow for the sharing of or access to data sources and at the same time open-source and commercial projects alike open to crowdsourcing. Tools such as Lingotek or the Google Translation Center offer translation interfaces that provide the necessary tools for translation and access to ever-growing public TMs. And these in turn can then be used to train MT to be more accurate.

To return to St. Jerome — he is without a doubt a fantastic model, but he has been forced to march to a new beat with different tools (Figure 1). If he continues to employ them wisely, they will not only make him more accurate and efficient, but give him access to a whole new world of communal resources and forms of collaboration.

![Figure 1: St. Jerome has been forced to march to a new beat with different tools.](image-url)
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A ccording to the 2005 American Community Survey, nearly 13 million US residents speak English “not well” or “not at all,” up from almost 11 million people in 2000. This trend is expected to continue as communities across the United States experience an increase in their immigrant populations. A recent Pew Research Center report estimates that 82% of the population increase in the United States through 2050 will be the result of newly-arrived immigrants and their children.

From border towns to big cities and the heartland, the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate services for the limited-English proficient (LEP) population is on the rise. Add to that an ever-growing global economy in which US companies will need to communicate with businesses and customers around the world, and it’s easy to see why the demand for translation professionals will only increase.

Spanish still dominates as the number one language requested for translation, but other languages are getting an increased amount of attention. Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Portuguese, Chinese, Russian and French LEP populations carve out sizable niches in the United States. Each geographic region has its own unique translation needs. In the Northeast, the primary non-English languages are Spanish, Chinese, Italian, French and Portuguese, while in the Midwest, Spanish, German, Polish, Arabic and French dominate.

New opportunities for translators

Besides immigration, other factors are driving the need for translators. In California, where more than 40% of the population speaks a language other than English, a new law taking effect January 1, 2009, mandates that health plans provide LEP enrollees with language assistance services at hospitals, clinics and other health care locations that accept plan insurance. Under the regulation passed as Senate Bill 853, health plans are required to evaluate the language make-up of each of the communities they serve. If 3,000 beneficiaries or 5% of the beneficiary population in the community speak a language other than English, health plans must provide assistance in that language when enrollees obtain health care services. Senate Bill 853 was passed to alleviate language and cultural barriers. The legislation stipulates that all vital documents must be translated into these “threshold” languages and interpretation services made available to enrollees at all points of contact.

If Cantonese is the primary language for a qualifying number of the population, for example, health plan providers near those segments of the population will need to have Cantonese interpreters available, as well as translated documentation and instructions.

Translating for the Growing US Markets

GEORGE RIMALOWER

About 100 insurers, including Cigna, UHC, Health Net, Aetna, Kaiser and Blue Cross offer health care coverage in California. Some insurers are already applying Senate Bill 853 standards in other states even though not yet required. The new California law is considered a model for other states with large LEP populations.

Another California regulation in the works that will require translation expertise, this time concerning lending documents, is also getting a close look around the country. Beginning in April 2009, California Assembly Bill 512 would require that all consumer real estate mortgage loans be translated into the primary language of the borrower. Currently, LEP borrowers are asked to sign loan documents written in English although the loan was negotiated in another language. The new law would be a means to eliminate language-related misunderstandings.

Marketing financial products to LEP speakers is also gaining popularity. For example, a company provides its employees with a self-directed retirement plan with multiple mutual fund options. More and more mutual fund companies are translating fund brochures and prospectuses into languages spoken by the company’s LEP employees. The practice helps employees make sound investment decisions, and it has been found to increase employee plan participation.

As more LEP workers find jobs in regions of the country not typically known for large non-English speaking communities, the businesses in these regions are beginning to implement language-specific safety programs that have been in effect for decades in states with high concentrations of immigrants such as California, Florida and New York. To comply with national safety requirements, businesses with LEP workers will need to translate Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations into languages their workers understand. Companies with LEP workers are already realizing that the cost to translate safety signs and literature is minimal when compared to a possible lawsuit if an LEP worker is injured on the job because of a lack of understanding safety procedures.

Translator jobs

Translation companies are always looking for competent, well-educated translators. The demand will only increase as these new laws, safety concerns and marketing opportunities fuel the need. What should a translator bring to the table? Ten or 15 years ago, only a handful of degree
translation training programs existed. Now, more than 15 universities around the United States offer translation degrees. The Monterey Institute of International Studies has been offering master’s programs for translators and interpreters for more than 35 years. At the very least, an undergraduate degree, whether in translation sciences or in another field, is usually required by reputable translation companies seeking to add to their translator roster. An American Translators Association certification validates the translator’s abilities.

Translators can take on a number of different roles during the translation process. Translators entering the field need to decide their strengths before marketing their services to a translation company. A translator who is well versed or has an advanced degree in law, for example, could be invaluable when translating court documents or legal contracts. On the other hand, a linguist with a medical background might consider translating clinical studies. All translators today are expected to be experts in computer-aided translation (CAT), GMS and TMS software programs. These programs make the translation process more efficient, consistent and accurate.

A translation must go through multiple steps before it is ready for the client. Each step requires a different set of translation skills. After a document has been translated, it is reviewed by an editor who focuses on fine-tuning the document’s cultural and linguistic integrity while ensuring that the register is appropriate for its target audience. The document must then be proofed by another translator who checks the document for spelling, punctuation, missing text and word wraps. The document may also be sent to a graphics department before it is finally delivered to the client. Novice translators must decide how they will participate in this process. In many cases, linguists can have the skills for all three roles: translator, editor and proofreader.

**Pitching your translation services**

Since translation is all about accuracy, translators seeking employment need to ensure that résumés and cover letters are error-free, with proper grammar and punctuation. Résumés should highlight education, accreditations, language pairing, expertise and services offered (translating, proofing, editing and desktop publishing, for instance). The résumé should also include a list of professional affiliations, software proficiency (word processing, desktop publishing, CAT and TMS) and the type of available hardware (printers, scanners, communication tools, ftp sites). Additional résumé information could include countries of residence, special interests and references from other translation professionals, clients or agencies.

Translation companies emphasize quality of translations and the ability to meet deadlines. Only by being honest about capabilities, respecting timelines, providing high-quality work and communicating clearly with language service companies can a novice translator advance to the list of preferred linguists.

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Translators are everywhere — from websites to the back of one’s utility account to the box your toothpaste came in. But what if you need one and you’re on your own to get it done? This question, though seemingly benign, raises a host of other issues to the uninitiated, often in a confusing array of terminology and resources. This article should partially guide the translation newcomer to finding the right service.

One of the most basic needs an individual might have is the translation of vital records such as birth, marriage and death certificates. Also included might be police and driving records, weapons permits, military discharge or service records, adoption papers and any number of other official documents that, even if in one’s possession, still require translation.

The custodians of these documents may reside in the countries of origin, each of which will have a different, if somewhat similar, process for obtaining duplicates or copies of originals. Obtaining the requisite documentation requires legal knowledge, of course, but may also require connections or legal authority in the country of record. Before a translation can even begin, expertise beyond linguistic skills is required.

Such expertise is usually not as simple as turning to a local civil attorney because the nature of the translation spans legal, linguistic and cultural bounds usually not housed under one roof.

In countries such as the United States, where immigration patterns often follow the ebb and flow of international politics, it is not uncommon to have to deal with documentation needs stemming from countries with which the United States has (or has had) limited diplomatic ties and their concomitant legal agreements. Such is the case with Cuba and Vietnam, for example. In other cases, the custodian of the documents may be indisposed or non-existent, especially if the country in which the documents originated has suffered war, natural disaster or chaotic government, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Myanmar and Somalia.

A step into nearly any metropolitan civil court in the United States reveals that these are not uncommon situations. At a court in Texas, for example, I witnessed several Vietnamese people seeking annulment of marriages because spouses could not be located after many years and the individuals wished to remarry. In an Oregon court I witnessed a South African seeking divorce from a spouse still resident, and definitely not lost, in that country. In a Nebraska court, a young couple sought court sanction of an arranged marriage consummated in Iraq while both were minors by US law — now eight years on with both now in the age of majority.

Beyond vital records are other documents as innocent as, say, a letter from Flanders telling the recipient that a grandparent’s government coal mining pension will be increased by a couple of percentage points, to the more complicated case of a home study done by a US adoption agency that must be submitted to the requirements of the Guatemalan or Chinese or Sudanese government, or even as heart-wrenching as a Red Cross appeal that must cross a local chapter to reach an outpost in a war-torn region in search of a lost child, sibling, parent or other relative.

Each of these situations requires expertise beyond the purely linguistic, and figuring out where to turn to even begin the process can be daunting. Fortunately, however, there are professional associations that can act as referral services or directories of members for either companies or individuals specializing in the type of the translation needed.

ProZ.com is a tremendous source of referral, for instance. It may often be self-referential, but is still useful. An individual may post his or her requirements and then receive bids from around the world. This is quite handy in that it allows one to locate individuals who have the expertise and contacts to get the job done, often at a fraction of the cost of engaging a middleperson of some kind in this country.

The site also offers a well-read forum in which one might pose a question about a translation and thus learn about available resources and gather questions to ask when eventually hiring a translator or translation service. As the site is global and globally read, answers can be had often in just a few hours. Over a period of days, the number of responses and wealth of information increases as more and more translators read the queries, which can either be language-specific or not.

One of the largest databases available is the American Translators Association (ATA), which compiles a list of members who self-identify areas of expertise and language pairs. It also maintains a list of translation companies that is helpful, among other things, in locating local resources who, if not experts themselves, may be able to refer to another source. A limitation of the resource, however, is that not all languages are listed in the drop-down menu provided.

Many countries offer a similar type of professional association, which can be located using a search engine and terms such as (in quotes) “[country name] translators” followed by words such as institute, association, union and so on. In this manner, one might again locate an in-country translator and gain insight into its needed expertise.

Research done this way may lead to more specialized professional associations suited to the case. For example, in the United States, there is the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, which also contains a searchable database of translation professionals. This organization is specific to the legal industry and its translation and interpretation needs. Most of the members are corporate and may have a depth and breadth of experience that is most appropriate for a given situation or need.

Courts often ask for “official,” “certified” or other “legalized” translations of documents, so that even if one succeeds in acquiring the documentation, it may be unclear as to what is actually required. Even if the original is signed, is sealed and contains enough stamps to wallpaper a small room, the “officialization” of the
translation is still needed — and unfortunately, exactly what this entails varies by jurisdiction, court and even judge.

Even in cases where one might expect national standards, such as with immigration cases, the same type of document from the same country may have to be treated differently based on the desire of the specific court in which the case is held.

Of prime importance in this instance is the knowledge that no translator is certified or otherwise “official” as constituted by any organization in the United States. While courts can and do certify interpreters through rigorous processes, often at the state or county level, they almost never certify translators except under the most unusual of circumstances.

The closest that we come in the United States to such a designation is “accreditation” granted by the ATA to those who pass its examinations. Such a designation is handy, but it is not an officially recognized national credential and it is only available in a few, selected language pairs, primarily European languages and a few East Asian languages. However, it may be sufficient in the eyes of a court.

It is incumbent on the individual to ascertain what “officialness” constitutes. This can be just about anything, from the relatively meaningless to the demanding or even, at times, seemingly random.

At the meaningless end of things, a raised seal or notarization may be required. In the first instance, any individual can purchase a raised seal at an office megastore for just a few dollars, whether or not he or she is a translator. Slightly up the scale is the notarization obtained from a notary public. While obtaining notarization does nothing other than identify (usually via a driver’s license) the person who signs the translation, it is, at least, testifying to the signature on the paper, whether or not that person was the translator.

On the more demanding end of things, translators may be asked to provide a “letter of competence” (also called by many other names) in which he or she outlines education, memberships and experience, includes some references, and maybe, in the most demanding of cases, provides copies of degrees from accredited universities. Rarely will a university transcript be necessary, but it does not hurt to have one on hand.

All said and done, however, sometimes the translator is but a mere formality for a lawyer and judge. I have seen one case where, after considerable expense, a Vietnamese translator was hired, paid a retainer, but never used, as the court simply accepted tax returns as proof that the individual had lived as a single person in the United States for the past ten years and thus annulled a previous marriage in Vietnam. In the case of a Bosnian matter, the court accepted that records were not available due to civil unrest. In the matter of a Cuban criminal case, the court accepted a Cuban police report and the word of a translator that there were no previous convictions in Cuba without any kind of official translation.

Thus, the provision and translation of life’s documentation are as varied as life itself. How they are received by authorities in question is equally varied and sometimes quite different from what one might expect.
Translation buyers have a short list of favorite providers who get the plum jobs, the ones who are called first for their language combination. What makes a project manager keep you at the top of their mind?

Excellent linguistic skills are de rigueur, as are prices that are within the industry’s tolerance help — neither too low to be credible nor too high to be affordable. But as long as translators and project managers remain human, the human relationship between the provider and the buyer is the key to the success or failure of a business.

This doesn’t mean a phony pretense to friendship; phonies behavior reeks for miles around. What it does mean is building a reputation for reliability. Because while a translator sells language services, the buyer is looking for reliability, for a known quantity in a business that is just as much art as craft.

How can you be in that quantity? Get into the habit of doing three things for each project you’re involved in, and then change focus and incorporate three things into the lifestyle you have outside of individual projects. When these become habits in your life, the market will respond, and reward you.

Here’s what you can do to give each translation you deliver a final polish.

**Read it over on paper.**

Screens are wonderful. Flat LCD screens are tempting; they threaten to colonize your desk, though they hardly take up any space. With all that on-screen clarity, can we skip that last step and proofread on screen?

Not if we want a successful business.

Mistakes leap out at us from the page in a way that puts to shame even the best proofreading tools. If your project can be printed out, grit your teeth and print it. Rapidly typing fingers insert all manner of errors into our texts. On-screen, we are lulled into complacency by the little red underlines. Off-screen, we are alert to actual meaning.

Every project is improved by a round of proofreading in a new context. Paper gives that context, after a text has only ever been seen on-screen. By all means, keep things environmentally friendlier and print on both sides of recycled paper. But do include the time you’ll need for printing out the project and reading it one last time on paper before you sign off on it and send it out.

**Ask if you’re not sure.**

Alas, telepathy is not in the typical translator’s toolbox.

Pause a moment to ponder the implications of this sad fact: we will get requests that we do not fully understand. Clients, being human, will make ambiguous statements, they’ll leave out some piece of information that we need in order to determine linguistic register, gender (what’s with the unisex names?), or a key clue about the audience for which the translation is being bought.

In such cases, “I don’t want to interrupt my client” is exactly the wrong idea. Gather up as many of your questions as you can before you start the project, and ask buyers what exactly they want or need. If new questions arise as you start translating, collect as many as you can for a single e-mail or conversation — as many as you can without halting your work on the project.

Don’t be a pest, don’t get in the way, but definitely ask by e-mail or phone. Consider it a quality assurance move: you’re making sure that you are in fact giving your clients what they want.

**Double-check arrival.**


So many things can divert the project delivery, be it by e-mail or physical mail! Happily, you can put a technological fix into place that will guarantee you find out about any delivery disasters befalling your projects.

Here’s the line of code to add to your project delivery e-mails: “Please confirm that you have received the correct file.”

Do not rely on automatic reading confirmations. What you want is an actual, human response: “Yes, I got it.” By asking if the correct file has been received, you’ve recruited your client’s attention. If they got the wrong file, they’ll know right then and there, and you will hear about it and be able to correct the error.

If the work is not delivered by e-mail, include the same question on your physical cover letter, and be sure to call and ask if it has really arrived.

You’d think everyone does this — but, no. Only successful translators do. Be one. Make sure your translation got to where it ought to be.

**The Big Picture**

Hunched over a translation, six dictionaries and a cup of coffee in reach, we are all too liable to lose track of the gross motor muscles that keep us in business. Here are three habits that will hold your career on track for the long term.

**Keep up with both languages.**

Language fades. You can see it in your own usage. If you are not exposed to one of your languages, idioms will start to slip, or you’ll mix up genders or come across some term that didn’t exist last year, probably in the field of consumer electronics.

Keep it up on a regular basis. Bookmark a web-based radio station in your other language; download podcasts to hear at the gym; subscribe to a monthly journal that will lie around, waiting to be read. The best translators are rampant datavores. Having a habit of devouring your data in both languages will keep your linguistic muscles flexed and ready for actual projects.

**Let the market know you’re out there.**

Translators sit alone in their cells, focusing on the tiny space between the languages. It is easy to stay there for the duration of your projects, enjoying the gentle flow of words over your brain.

“Easy” is a clue: if it’s easy, you need to be doing more.

Every freelance professional must spend time and effort to inform possible clients that his or her skills are out there. Build this into your week as a habitual thing, not a one-time project. Print up a brochure, contact likely buyers, trade organizations, commercial and governmental organizations. Do something — anything — to keep your name out there, where potential clients might become actual clients.

**Engage in gratuitous learning.**

We deal in words, and words are used to describe and explain things in many fields. Spend time learning about a subject, and its vocabulary will force itself into your consciousness. Learn new words — which means new tools for your trade, new usages, new ways of being able to say the things that you are called upon to say.

Gratuitous learning is the sort of learning that does not follow naturally from everything else you have learned before. It is a horizon-expanding kind of learning and tends to refresh the mind of the learner. In every week, include fifteen minutes of something entirely out of your regular route of learning language.
Are you tired of translating? Do you miss working at whatever it was you did before joining the profession? Never fear, you can drive yourself out of business quickly and efficiently, to the point where you will never be burdened with translation projects again. If you want to keep plying your trade, though, watch out for those steps — and take preventative measures to avoid them. Here are four surefire ways to destroy your reputation as a translator — and five good ways to sustain the esteem of your clients and co-workers.

Overpromise

Put your cape on, Superhero — or is it SuperTranslator? You can do anything. You speak Swedish and English, and some project manager asked you to translate Norwegian? Go for it. You can surely do a good job anyway, piecing together any unfamiliar idiom with a little help from Google. Time constraints? Not! A! Problem! If you’re asked to translate 50,000 words by the day after tomorrow, just say yes and deal with the consequences later. Medical translation? No biggie, it’s in your source language, and it looks a lot like words. Promise them anything, that’s what a salesman does, isn’t it?

Not if you like translating for a living...

If you want to keep your clients, learn the n-word and use it frequently. No may be your best tool for keeping and expanding your business. If it’s outside of your area of expertise, your language or your comfort zone and if doing a project endangers your health, “thank you for contacting me about this, but I will not be able to take on this project” sounds much more professional than the three a.m. scream of despair when it turns out that you’ve committed to something that was not merely a stretch, but an actual impossibility.

Drop deadlines

You promised it on Tuesday morning? Thursday is only two days later, and it also starts with a T. Close enough, really. The project manager has her hands full of so many clients and languages, she won’t notice if your project slides a few more days. If you’re battling the clock, you can’t just stop translating and take the time to call and inform your client, right? That would be a distraction, and they might get a little mad. So just soldier on, ignore frantic e-mail queries and turn off your phone’s ringer. When they get it, they’ll get it.

Not if you like translating for a living...

Translation is never the last step of a process — which means that any delay

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**TRANSLATION**

**Getting Started**

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**TRANSLATION**
in your schedule jams up the schedules of everyone who comes after you. Your project manager takes all the heat from the end client and the designer and the database specialist and anyone else who wants to get his or her hands on that text; she counts on you to get results to her desk at a particular time, which you’ve committed to do — all translation projects have deadlines. If you can’t make the deadline, let your project manager know as soon as possible, and come up with an alternative plan you can actually work with. Deadline reliability may be the single most important quality in a translator.

TRANSLATION
Guide: GETTING STARTED

As Close as It Gets

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Type like a Neanderthal

A word processor is just like a typewriter, except you never have to fight with the ink. Tabs and spaces are just the same, callouts and tables are both just boxes, so use them interchangeably. For an end client, deliver everything in a fixed-size font; if your project is heading to a designer, use fancy fonts and mess things up with the occasional table. Don’t ask what’s needed — just guess. If you’re translating a website, ignore all those things between the pointy brackets. Just type over them. In Cyrillic.

Not if you like translating for a living...
There’s always some way of messing up a document. Talk to your project manager to find out what the client wants. Moreover, learn your tools. If your primary translation environment includes Microsoft Word, read a book about it or take a class.

File first drafts

You read it, you translated it, it’s in English now, send it in. No need for spell-checking. No need to read it over, top to bottom, on paper rather than on screen. No need to ask your favorite proofreader to glance at it in exchange for your glances at his or her work. Just lob it off in the next e-mail, with a sigh of relief when you press send. Right?

Not if you like translating for a living...
Nobody’s perfect. Put into place a standard quality assurance routine, and stick to it. Use automated tools, changes of environment from screen to paper and from desk to clipboard to make the errors jump out at you. Get some help from a friendly colleague, or contract out your proofing. Errors will still crop up in documents, but not so many of them, nor quite so embarrassing.

Career not done yet?

Translation is a trust-based industry. This implies that if you’re still getting jobs, there are still people out there who trust you — for both your language abilities and your people skills. That trust is your greatest asset. If you like translating for a living, nurture the trust your clients have in you. Underpromise but overdeliver; live up to every promise you’ve given; know your tools and your boundaries; and adopt a humble point of view. This will help turn your linguistic assets into professional ones and drive your ability to retain clients over many years of career development in a field that clamors for new talent.

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